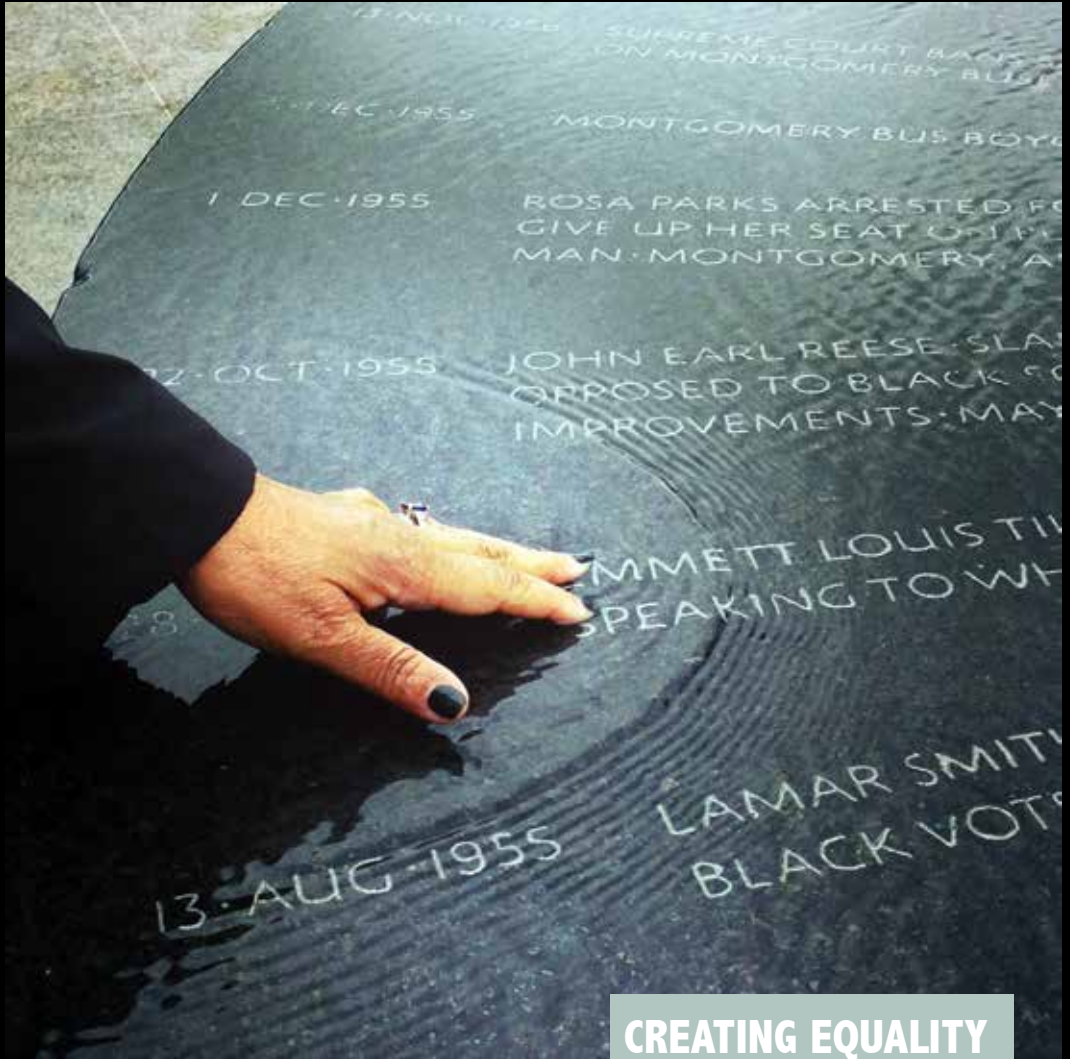


# THE MIND'S EYE

A Liberal Arts Journal

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts



## CREATING EQUALITY

In Celebration of the 50th Anniversary  
of Key Civil Rights Legislation

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On the cover: “Monument to Milestones in the Movement,” created by Maya Lin, at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, AL.

## *From the Editor*

In fall 2014, MCLA launched *Creating Equality*, a two-year program in celebration of the 50th anniversary of key civil rights legislation and an exploration of the state of civil rights in American society today. Through talks by activists Gloria Steinem and Andrew Young, musical performances, movie screenings, as well as numerous campus and community discussions, *Creating Equality* allowed MCLA staff, faculty, students, and the community an opportunity to delve into these important issues. It was in the spirit of these wide-ranging events and discussions that the decision was made to dedicate an issue of *The Mind's Eye* to this topic.

The contributors to this volume demonstrate the intellectual energy and vitality found in interdisciplinary study. Anne M. Blaschke's article "Reassessing Activism: Sport, Femininity, and the Nashville Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1965," examines the role of female college track and field athletes in using "soft power" to educate and influence the media and policy makers at home and abroad on the African American Civil Rights Movement. Buffy D. Lord in her photo essay chronicles MCLA's 2014 Bus Tour of Civil Rights Sites in the American South, and the impact it had on the group as they traveled, visited key historical sites, and met with the Movement's participants.

In her article, "Emmet Till: Race and the Geography of Place," Frances Jones-Sneed highlights the importance of geography in shaping the individual and collective memory of African Americans. Mark D. Miller's "Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*)," traces the connections and disconnections in the ideas of Robert Penn Warren and James Baldwin, and how we might apply some of their perspectives to the events of today, while Kelli Newby and Jill Gilbreth review Roxane Gay's influential book, *Bad Feminist*. Original poetry by Ewa Chrusciel, Zach Finch, and Stan Spencer also can be found in this issue.

We hope readers will enjoy the provocative and engaging mix of interdisciplinary perspectives published here, and that they help open up continued discussion and debate. Despite the challenges that we still face today in achieving full civil rights for all people, let me end with a reminder of Frederick Douglass' words: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress."

Ely M. Janis, Ph. D.

# Reassessing Activism: Sport, Femininity, and the Nashville Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1965

BY ANNE M. BLASCHKE

Historians have long noted the key roles black colleges played in the Civil Rights Movement. Despite their unique role as representatives of race pride at home and abroad, however, black female student athletes have remained largely unexplored by analysts of racial equality effort. This article brings to light the activism of a previously unexplored university cadre: women's track and field teams. A study of these students reveals how activists often acknowledged their own limits in organized activism even as they claimed race advocacy leadership in forums outside dramatic local protests. Pragmatic actors rather than idealists, women tracksters owned their unique position in the movement even as they noted their own refusal to follow conventional student leadership.

While black women athletes found personal stakes too high to participate in dramatic protests demanding integration in their university towns as students, they made highly visible international statements on United States national sports teams at the height of the Cold War, where they glamorized American sport and demonstrated a purported racial tolerance in the U.S. sport participation simultaneously thrust black women's teams to the forefront of race politics as national and international representatives of one of few elite integrated organizations in the country, and circumscribed their "official" movement activism with prohibitively high participation costs in the

college towns where their student status enabled them to excel on the national scene. A detailed look at female elite runners and coaches from Nashville, TN, in the late 1950s and early 1960s shows how tracksters became “soft” activists-by-example as integration pioneers in elite sport even as they refused to engage in confrontational, nonviolent direct action. Wilma Rudolph, 1960 Olympic triple gold medalist, embodied this athletic activism.

Nashville’s Sun Belt location, storied Music City history, and numerous religious and higher education institutions marked it a cosmopolitan Southern city as World War II ended, though local boosters had styled their city the “Athens of the South” long before the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> Many white Middle Tennesseans saw their region as racially progressive after 1945, understanding this attitude in the context of Nashville’s cultural sophistication; they evidenced Nashville’s longstanding antipathy for poll taxes, its increasing black voting bloc, and black residents’ increasing influence on city governance.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Jim Crow dominated Middle Tennessee. Businesses operated separate white and black facilities. The novelty of downtown Nashville rarely justified, for its black college population, the segregated mores at movie theaters or shops required to partake in its pleasures.<sup>3</sup> At Tennessee State Agricultural and Industrial College (A&I), the nucleus of women’s elite U.S. track and field by the late 1950s, Tennessee “Tigerbelles” coach Edward Temple found Nashville shocking when he moved from Pennsylvania to run track for A&I himself. “I came here in ’46 and it really was rough,” he remembered, despite having faced racial slurs on integrated childhood basketball courts in Harrisburg.<sup>4</sup> While Nashville’s Historical Black College or University (HBCU) athletes did not compete against white schools, which precluded most open racial confrontations, segregation circumscribed athletes’ lives. Of the city’s four HBCUs, three—Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and A&I—lay in the city’s African-American section of North Nashville (American Baptist Theological Seminary [ABTS] lay south of the Cumberland River).<sup>5</sup> North Nashville grew increasingly segregated between 1940 and 1960.<sup>6</sup>

Financial discrimination also disadvantaged HBCUs, which received fewer public dollars than white Metro schools like the University of Tennessee (UT) or Vanderbilt University.<sup>7</sup> Of comparison to UT, Temple laughed, “It’s just more different than day and night.”<sup>8</sup> His own monthly salary totaled \$150 for combined tasks of women’s coaching and administrating the campus post office.<sup>9</sup> Team resources were similarly paltry. “Shoot, we started at Title I,” he reflected on his inaugural year. “[Y]ou don’t get much lower than a \$64-a-year athletic budget.”<sup>10</sup> Fewer institutional dollars meant work aid for A&I athletes rather than scholarships. And teams trained in abysmal facilities. Lacking an indoor track, winter athletes practiced sprints across slick auditorium

floors and through narrow doorways, a dangerous practice. “We had to run through doors that were just big enough for a person to get through. I mean just enough,” emphasized Temple. “If you was an inch or two off, you were just going to hit the wall or hit the ceiling. It was—rough times.”<sup>11</sup> The outdoor track ended in a dump before making a full oval and paralleled a pigsty.<sup>12</sup>

Women’s running nonetheless thrived at HBCUs. Tuskegee Institute and A&I led this trend from the late 1920s.<sup>13 14</sup> After graduating and being hired as coach, Temple began his program with elite expectations, reasoning, “Why not go first class?” In 1952 he courted two-time Olympian Mae Faggs, the nation’s fastest 200-meter runner.<sup>15</sup> When Faggs moved south from Queens, NY, however, local racial mores made adjustment rough. Despite her extensive sport-related travel, she found Middle Tennessee the most difficult place to exist as a black woman that she had ever been. “...[A]fter the first year I had a hard time convincing her to come back for second year because, you know, it’s a big culture shock coming from New York, coming to Nashville, Tennessee,” Temple intoned. “At that time it was heavy segregation in the Fifties...it was hard for her to adjust.”<sup>16</sup> Fellow outsiders empathized; “culture shock” defined northerner Gloria McKissack’s freshman year.<sup>17</sup> The commercial cityscape provided jarring reminders of race disparity. A “huge billboard that had the Gold Dust Twins looking down” loomed above Nashville’s business district, while markets stocked items like “Negro Beans.”<sup>18</sup>

Temple and the Tigerbelles hit a benchmark of new fame in this era through the early 1960s, triumphing at the Pan-American Games and Rome Olympics. The Tigerbelles negotiated, then, two different identities: prestigious international elites and local social inferiors in the eye of the storm of the swelling Civil Rights Movement, which crashed on Nashville in the late 1950s.

Nashville’s students surged into the Southern civil rights struggle in this same period. Music City boasted more than 20 colleges in 1945. Students at each “race” institution, as well as Vanderbilt and other white local colleges, participated in the Nashville movement.<sup>19</sup> These undergraduates developed and sustained the tenacity that would make the city a critical outpost in the student movement to integrate public facilities for the next five years.<sup>20</sup>

Nashville collegians joined a municipal equality network active since the New Deal.<sup>21</sup> A&I alum and local NAACP chapter president Kelly Miller Smith, minister at downtown Nashville’s First Baptist Church, had long associated equality with Protestant fellowship when in 1958 he founded the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC) to unite black churches in the goal of integrating public accommodations. Most A&I undergraduates attended church in the city. They absorbed the call to serve. Temple remem-



bered that although parishioners at his own church played varied roles, “everybody done their part.”<sup>22</sup> Smith reached beyond Nashville to connect the group with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the younger minister’s philosophy of Christian nonviolent resistance.<sup>23</sup> Locally, Smith aligned with Gandhi devotee and Highlander Folk School alum James Lawson to train students from the city’s four HBCUs and its black secondary institution, Pearl High School, in nonviolent direct action techniques in 1959.

The Nashville Student Movement began in earnest the following year. Fisk undergraduate Diane Nash and ABTS student John Lewis played leadership roles. Chicago native Nash, an unusually assertive woman organizer of a male-dominant group, led sit-ins and pioneered the “jail, no bail” concept of dramatizing activists’ unjust incarceration.<sup>24</sup> A month of sit-ins and students’ arrests led a coalition of white city officials and black ministers to suggest a partial-integration program, which students rejected, instead calling for a boycott of discriminatory businesses in March 1960. Indeed, students formed the most radical wing of Nashville’s civil rights movement, though they worked with Smith’s more procedural organizations. “The mayor’s committee said there was a gap—a chasm—between what we asked and what was given,” reflected Smith in early April. “We want to see if we can bridge that gap with the merchants... We are still seeking desegregation of this community.”<sup>25</sup>

At the climax of the Nashville Sit-In movement on April 19, 1960, the day a bomb destroyed students’ defense attorney Z. Alexander Looby’s home, Nash marched with more than 3,000 protesters to City Hall, and, on its steps, challenged Mayor Ben West to concede the injustice of racial segregation.<sup>26</sup> In front of the crowd West acknowledged—to segregationist constituents’ fury—that public spaces should be desegregated. A “very aggressive” liberal paper ran the headline “Integrate Counters—Mayor” the following morning.<sup>27</sup> Activists maintained the boycott for six weeks, until further negotiations forced recalcitrant businesses to desegregate lunch counters on May 10.

A&I, Nashville’s largest HBCU, contributed the bulk of student activists to such work. Its undergraduates thronged to NCLC sit-ins and the organization’s joint Freedom Ride effort with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1961.<sup>28</sup> High school students, including athletes, participated, too. In Clarksville, Wilma Rudolph’s hometown an hour north, teacher Joseph Roberts spearheaded teens’ efforts to protest Nashville segregation, driving carloads south to join sit-ins and picket lines in the state capitol.<sup>29</sup> Roberts used Clarksville youth athletics networks to mobilize teen activists.<sup>30</sup> Rudolph had matriculated at A&I by the time Roberts inspired her hometown’s adolescents. But Clarksville’s racial code had long affected her worldview.

From Rudolph's earliest observations of Middle Tennessee, she determined that "...white people treat[ed] their horses better than they treated us black people."<sup>31</sup> She endured particular harassment from white locals as a red-haired, light-skinned child among darker-complexioned siblings in the mid-1940s. White Clarksvillians regularly stopped her to ask why she kept company with black children, not realizing she was also African-American.<sup>32</sup> Government-sanctioned slights to her family also left bitterness. Two older brothers returned from fighting in World War II to recount the ignominy of military segregation. "Both of these brothers were in segregated outfits, and they both felt that somebody up there in the Pentagon had a lot of nerve," Rudolph emphasized, "making them fight in a war while telling them, at the same time, they weren't fit to fight it alongside white soldiers."<sup>33</sup>

Similar humiliations punctuated her parents' daily lives. In Rudolph's girlhood view, Clarksville's black women faced galling trials. Her mother waited long hours on whites as a domestic six days a week for bad pay; the insurance salesman flouted his disrespect for their home on his visits. Rudolph swore as a child to avoid her parents' limited opportunities as poor black southerners. "'Wilma,' I said to myself, 'you ain't never gonna be serving coffee to no white folks in bed on Saturday mornings.'"<sup>34</sup>

Rudolph had ample time to observe such injustices as a child because poor health kept her out of school until she turned seven.<sup>35</sup> A victim of double pneumonia, scarlet fever, and polio, she suffered numerous related ailments, most seriously a warped left leg. Weekly, hour-long physical therapy trips to Nashville's Meharry Medical School, the closest black hospital, deepened her resentment at the Southern caste system; she commuted via the backs of buses and ate packed lunches, rather than segregated restaurant meals, on board. Years of treatment cured Rudolph of polio's effects by age 11.

Rudolph's newfound immersion in normal adolescence provided respite from the needling racism that languishing indoors had earlier forced her to notice. Released gingerly by her parents into her siblings' extracurricular orbit, she paid more attention to new friends and activities at her segregated school, Burt High School, than the wounds of deeply embedded discrimination. By contrast, another black southern teen born in 1940 who would become an athlete and author, Anne Moody, remembered these same years as the crystallization of a race-specific anger that had only vaguely burned during childhood: "I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people."<sup>36</sup> For Moody, the murder of Chicago teen Emmett Till in Money, MS, catalyzed this first utter disconnect from the status quo. Near Till's relatives in the state's delta region, Rudolph's future A&I Tigerbelle teammate Willye White also experienced a visceral reaction to his killing: terror. "I came out of a totally

segregated area where that fourteen-year-old-child had just been lynched in my hometown,” she reflected later on her motivation to pursue sport out of state.<sup>37</sup> White’s 1955 invitation from Temple to join the Tigerbelles farm team came at an opportune moment.

Rudolph, insulated from such violent events of the deepest South by 150 miles and a curriculum that omitted southern social history—“nobody ever told us about lynchings”—turned toward social interaction and popular culture as a teenager, though the color line remained an omnipresent cultural filter.<sup>38</sup> Yet a force stronger than romance or music overtook her as a freshman: athletics. Rudolph grew up familiar with sports; her siblings played basketball, and her father umpired segregated baseball games.<sup>39</sup> By her early teens, Rudolph followed her older sister, Charlene, onto the basketball team and became Burt High’s star player. Temple, who moonlighted as a regional girls’ basketball referee, spotted her on the court in 1955. At A&I farm team camp that summer, Rudolph met ambitious black women she could look up to. The older Tigerbelles—especially Olympic veteran Faggs—proved that black women traveled the world and set ambitions higher than domestic or laundress.

Rudolph’s experiences with southern segregation aligned with many of her teammates. With notable exceptions, her fellow Tigerbelles hailed from Tennessee, Georgia, and Mississippi. Their identities had been racially circumscribed all their lives. They brought this collective familiarity with the southern “way of life” to A&I’s formidable track squad in the 1950s and ’60s. Nearly all harbored deep personal resentments of Jim Crow, which affected their views of white people and the Movement exploding in Nashville.



Despite the Tigerbelles’ resentment of racism, almost no team members participated in the confrontational direct action of the Nashville Student Movement.<sup>40</sup> They prioritized “soft” sport activism not just for love of competition or track. Rather, sport made possible their college educations and corresponding potential to ascend to middle class careers after graduation.

As individuals, most Tigerbelles valued the educational experience at A&I above all other doors that elite track opened. Though they loved the competition and athleticism of track and field, most realized that impossibility of a postgraduate sport career because no such professional opportunity existed for women. “You can’t run, jump, and throw forever,” reminded Temple.<sup>41</sup> A diploma meant access to a middle-class lifestyle and a career outside the service industries. As such, protecting their educations was a central reason for not participating. Most athletes came from poor families; their parents still

toiled in low-income jobs, sharecropping or working in white homes. A&I educations also opened up social connections on which most Tigerbelles capitalized, building connections through such extracurricular activities as sororities, football games, dances, and clubs. Many Tigerbelles through 1968 were the first in their families to graduate from high school. Nearly all were the first college graduates. Indeed, in 1960 the Tigerbelles were unusual for having finished high school—among the 38.6 percent of African American secondary school graduates—and the 4.3 percent of black students enrolled in four-year colleges.<sup>42</sup> Any off-campus commitment that could distract from these trailblazing opportunities was not worth the cost of graduating from college.

Forgoing sacrifice that could get them expelled was an even easier decision. A&I, like other Southern black colleges, had a strong interest in producing well-mannered, socially appropriate, modest students. Gender proscriptions composed a critical part of the school's reputation. While most mainstream educational institutions also enforced curfews and parietal laws, HBCUs felt extra pressure to counteract longstanding white stereotypes about black women's lasciviousness, and often were especially strict.<sup>43</sup> A&I had stringent on-campus behavior codes. Tigerbelles lived even more regulated lives than average students. Their precarious existence—contingent upon meager funding, work-aid, and multiple events per athlete—meant that any disciplinary disruption that removed a team member could blight their chances at national success. Willye White's painful dismissal in 1959 demonstrated the devastating consequences of acting out of ladylike code. "She felt since she was the second best in the world, she won a silver medal in the Melbourne, Australia, Olympics in 1956, that she could come back and ride in the cars," Temple remembered. "[T]he third time, she was out of here."<sup>44</sup> Having broken A&I's institutional rules and defied Temple's authority, White moved North to Chicago, where her new coach trained the Catholic Youth Organization team with a freer hand. The Tigerbelles' disciplined lifestyle remained exacting.

Meanwhile, the Nashville Student Movement quickly earned the ire of southern officials. In response to sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and other dramatic challenges to Jim Crow, Tennessee officials instituted an amplified public university behavioral code to discourage undergraduate activism. Nashville's status as a Freedom Ride terminus meant that, by 1961, Mississippi officials as well as Tennessee segregationists pressured A&I to go from "three strikes" expulsion to a "no questions asked" policy for racial reasons—and further, to narrow the definition of expulsion-worthy offense to anyone arrested, causing a disturbance, or absent from class.<sup>45</sup> Even the most demure, modestly dressed students who participated in nonviolent direct activism downtown

broke those rules. Because A&I was the largest contributor to the movement and Nashville's only public black college, it was highly vulnerable to Tennessee lawmakers' efforts to quell activism by throwing students out of school. Jail time failed to frighten students out of the movement, reasoned segregationists, but academic expulsion likely would.<sup>46</sup>

Numerous A&I, Fisk, and ABTS undergraduates ignored these rules to fight, in their eyes, for a more important cause.<sup>47</sup> Nash, an extreme example, left Fisk to work full time for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and NCLC in late 1960.<sup>48</sup> Less militant women also made painful choices and sometimes prioritized individual potential over the collective goal of race equality. After McKissack's parents caught her out of her off-campus apartment at a girls' "sleep-in" at the Hermitage Hotel in 1961, for example, she faced a difficult decision: activism or college. "...I had a choice that either I was moved on campus and under curfew and get out of the movement, or I had to come home."<sup>49</sup> She left the movement. Meanwhile, A&I expelled 14 Freedom Riders who were arrested in Mississippi, in highly publicized and controversial cases that generated solidarity protests at the capitol and on campus. The Tigerbelles certainly knew of integration activists' punishment. For elite athletes who competed on a seasonal basis and qualified for once-in-a-lifetime events, waiting out an unlikely re-admittance hearing could mean missing the Olympic trials or the chance to break a world record. Not one dared risk controversial activism.

The athletes' personalities and childhoods also played roles in their decisions to abstain from participating. White, who vividly remembered white Mississippi Delta enforcers' vigilante tactics, avoided any activist controversy. For others, nonviolent passive resistance clashed with their natural tendency to compete and fight. Lively personalities that had gravitated toward sport, an unconventionally "tomboyish" choice since childhood, did not take well to the concept of nonviolent passive resistance. "I was raised to hit back if you're hit," noted 1960s Tigerbelle Wyomia Tyus. "I was not a person to be marching."<sup>50</sup> Among the teammates, emphasized Temple, only "one or two of them" expressed real longing to participate in the 1960 sit-ins and the ongoing nonviolent direct action of the early decade.<sup>51</sup>

The Tigerbelles' varied reservations about participating in controversial civil rights activity did not prevent them from following the Nashville Student Movement's efforts with intense interest. Since Kelly Miller Smith disseminated NCLC information through black Metro churches, Tigerbelles—practicing Christians without exception—heard much about the moral and spiritual struggle for equality in services. One of the few tactics on which nearly all black Nashville residents—including students, administration, and

professors—agreed was boycotting discriminatory businesses. Fisk University professor Vivian Henderson, brainchild of the 1961 “savings program” response to whites’ continued public segregation, guessed that 98 percent of the African-American population refused to patronize targeted shops.<sup>52</sup> The Tigerbelles fully participated in both the 1961 and 1963 boycotts. “Nobody, nobody went downtown,” Temple emphasized.<sup>53</sup> Although North Nashville provided most necessary goods, avoiding the downtown made a powerful statement, and allowed women athletes to feel involved in direct action that deprived merchants of millions of dollars in the early Sixties, driving them first to the bargaining table, and ultimately to concession on integration.<sup>54</sup>

Women track stars from Nashville also understood themselves as unique participants in the Nashville civil rights movement as elite athletes from a historically black metro school. Dominating global competition, they claimed a form of agency and race advocacy no other participants could represent. Temple initiated this framing of their athletic success in the context of Nashville’s Student Movement when his runners asked him about their roles in the struggle. While the Tigerbelles’ personal circumstances and athletic commitment precluded them from mass participation in controversial activism, their talent on the track enabled them to demonstrate black women’s equality, and A&I students’ in particular. “...I told them, ‘You’re here to get an education and run track,’” he maintained.<sup>55</sup> But, solidarity with their classmates was actually inherent in their athletic endeavors. “They’re gonna help by sitting on the stools and we’re gonna help by winning a national championship know that here, a historical predominately black school can win a national championship and go on and win international championships,” he insisted. A&I was united in the fight for racial integration. “All of us going to play a great part in getting the point across because we’re all coming from Nashville.”<sup>56</sup>

Playing this activist-athlete role, however, meant surpassing the average A&I student’s commitment to projecting a positive institutional impression off campus. The Tigerbelles represented Nashville’s racial justice effort at home and abroad. This commitment meant upholding Tigerbelle standards of femininity, academic excellence, and elite performance. Temple foisted this responsibility on his athletes. University President Walter Davis lauded Rudolph and men’s track champion Ralph Boston, both gold medalists at Rome in 1960, in this same context, arguing that A&I strove to ascend to “big league” college sports not merely for its own benefit; rather, “We intend to work, plan and prepare for major university class competition...because in our loud cries for first class citizenship, we must demonstrate with first class performance and in major class circles we are afforded a stage for this demonstration.”<sup>57</sup> The first televised Olympics, and Rudolph’s 1961 Sullivan Award—the AAU’s an-

nual prize for the greatest United States amateur athlete—surely constituted the broadest, and most prestigious, audience A&I administration could wish to make the case for black academic equality. Davis and Temple both argued for “first-class citizenship” via A&I’s prominent elite domestic and international victories. The Tigerbelles’ unparalleled success, for them, represented black Nashville’s importance to the movement.

Yet by virtue of their nationally ranked talent, the team also took their place in the far longer-standing track tradition of social diversity. Track and field was highly distinctive in sports, and among social institutions for its integrated rosters. Tigerbelles won six of the women’s track team’s seven medals at the 1960 Olympiad, making a persuasive case that black women and black southern schools were as valuable to the United States as whites.<sup>58</sup> But the national team at capacity—before eliminations and losses—was 33 percent white.<sup>59</sup> Since 1932, in fact, American women’s Olympic track squads had featured both black and white athletes, though not in roughly equal numbers, until Tuskegee built its strength to dominate national championships in the 1940s.<sup>60</sup> So although the Tigerbelles sought to exert social influence as an organizational “race” bloc, by competing on integrated national teams, they simultaneously merged with an alternate dynamic that had proven mixed-race competition effective, if contentious, since World War II.

During the 1930s and ’40s, black women athletes—unlike contemporary race equality activists—had not agitated for equal representation or increased rights. They had not sought to compete against white schools or enter private segregated meets in urban centers; requested special travel privileges; or used their international success to petition local, state, or federal sources for more money for their schools. A&I, however, rose to prominence around 1955, as the postwar Civil Rights Movement gained increasing national attention after several particularly gruesome Mississippi murders, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions, and the beginning of the Montgomery, AL, bus boycott.<sup>61</sup> Increased publicity and broader participation in social equality activism set a new context for the fact black coaches helmed the best women’s athletes in the United States. The nation’s premier elite athletic group, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), long having realized that most of its power sprinters and jumpers trained at Southern black colleges, endorsed Temple and other coaches’ efforts to portray black women athletes as socially acceptable and overtly feminine. Temple became one of four black coaches to play a dominant role in women’s national track and field. In 1958 he leveraged his influence to be named U.S. coach of the first annual U.S.-USSR dual meet, a critical position because of the cultural power of the Cold War in the United States.

American women tracksters had to dominate international competition in order for black coaches to maintain their cultural authority. Had Temple's teams lost major meets, his credibility, as someone whose record was so strong that it crossed racial boundaries, would have deteriorated. Though he couldn't eat in most Nashville restaurants in 1960, he directed 17 elite racially mixed athletes representing the United States in Rome that year.<sup>62</sup>

Women's track, therefore, showcased integrated teams decades before an organized mass movement challenged Jim Crow. Black coaches realized that, for their athletes, gender conventionality was critical for both the multiracial and black blocs. The Tigerbelles' status rose partly because of their talent, but also because of the women's socially appropriate behavior and aesthetics. Less controversial than the civil rights activists causing such controversy in the South, Temple and his charges provided examples of expertise and authority that few global critics contested. No one could argue with the Tigerbelles' record of five AAU championships, seventeen Pan-American medals, and twelve Olympic gold medals by 1961.<sup>63</sup> Yet these ferocious statistics dovetailed with the overt femininity, charm, and academic aptitude that comprised, along with elite skill, the Tigerbelle identity. A&I tracksters fulfilled Temple's ambition of civil rights participation in "coming from Nashville" by embodying the emphasized femininity the team had sought since its beginning. The same socially legitimate impression the black women undergraduates cast in the Olympic spotlight was also critical strategy in the Nashville Student Movement and broader civil rights struggle: to appear middle-class, gender-appropriate, and socially acceptable.

While female athletic teams—and in particular black women's track and field programs, which fostered the nation's largest groups of world-class women athletes from one region, and even one school—abstained from confrontational participation in Nashville's controversial student movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they understood their athletic representation of the United States at home and abroad as Civil Rights advocacy. While women's sport did not lead directly to changes in the law, it directly influenced political power players' and the media's impressions of race and gender at home and abroad, arguably contributing a critical "soft" power in activism to the student movement in Nashville and beyond.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Linda T. Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day: The Nashville Sit-Ins, February 13-May 10, 1960," Vol. L, No. 1, Spring 1991, p. 43. Box 180, Folder: *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, David Halberstam Collection, HGARC at BU.



- <sup>2</sup> Don H. Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985, pp. 224-225.
- <sup>3</sup> Gloria McKissack interview with James Haney, "Comments with Dr. James Haney Presents," WNAB, Channel 58 and WUXP, Channel 30 and WZTV, Channel 17, Nashville, TN, 2003. McKissack and Haney were both professors in the history department at TSU. 10-min. clip. McKissack notes that she refused to use the colored train terminal restroom on her second trip to Nashville in 1961.
- <sup>4</sup> Ed Temple interview with author, October 23, 2008, interview in author's possession. Temple's childhood in the Pennsylvania state capital had exposed him to significant race prejudice in sport. His elementary and secondary schools taught both black and white children. "A lot of segregation," however, "and a lot of name-calling" marked Harrisburg's youth athletic network. One of the few black students at his high school, he faced neighboring schools' cheerleaders chants of, "Get that nigger!" during basketball games, and once rode a football team bus to an opposing school only to watch as rival students surrounded the vehicle, yelling, "One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Five niggers on the team!" (On these quotes, see: Ed Temple interview with Rachel Lawson, June 11, 2003, Copyright 2003 by the Nashville Public Library, Nashville, TN.) Temple understood, as a high school senior, the appeal of community level athletics as a venue to express social resentment and racial vitriol. He nevertheless enrolled at Tennessee A&I, a segregated, urban southern school, because his high school coach, Tom Harris recruited both Temple and his athletic rival, Leroy Craig, by telling each the other had accepted A&I's offer. By the time they realized Harris had hoodwinked them, both decided to stay in Nashville to run for the Tigers.
- <sup>5</sup> Tennessee A&I and American Baptist both adopted new names during the period my study covers. American Baptist Theological Seminary changed its name to American Baptist College when it became accredited in 1973. On Fisk and Meharry in the 1960s and '70s, see: Don H. Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985. Tennessee A&I and American Baptist both adopted new names during the period my study covers. American Baptist Theological Seminary changed its name to American Baptist College when it became accredited in 1973. On Fisk and Meharry in the 1960s and '70s, see: Don H. Doyle, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985.
- <sup>6</sup> Don H. Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985. Appendix A: Population and Race, Nashville and Davidson County, 1860-1980, p. 273.
- <sup>7</sup> On TSU, Vanderbilt, and UT in comparison: Nellie Kenyon, "State Plans \$600,000 Expansion in New Buildings at A & I College: Education Board to Meet Friday, Pass on Projects," *The Bulletin*, February 1948, Volume XXXVI, No. 6, 1-2, TSU.
- <sup>8</sup> Transcript, Ed Temple interview with Rachel Lawson, June 11, 2003, Copyright 2003 by the Nashville Public Library, Nashville, TN, p. 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Ed Temple interview with Anne Blaschke, October 23, 2008, interview in author's possession.

- <sup>10</sup> Ed Temple and B'Lou Carter, *Only the Pure in Heart Survive*, Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1980, 29.
- <sup>11</sup> Transcript, Ed Temple interview with Rachel Lawson, June 11, 2003, Copyright 2003 by the Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee, p. 10. Misspelling presumably transcribed emphasis on Temple's part.
- <sup>12</sup> Ed Temple and B'Lou Carter, *Only the Pure in Heart Survive*, Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1980, 29.
- <sup>13</sup> For example of the Tuskegee Relays as preeminent regional black competition venue, see: "Sixteenth Annual Tuskegee Relays Carnival," Box 1, Cleveland Abbott Papers, TUA, 7 pp.
- <sup>14</sup> Jessie Abbott earned a Master of Science degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1941. She joined other black women athletes, coaches, and teachers, in so doing, in pursuing an advanced degree. See: "The Regents of the University of Wisconsin..." September 27, 1941, Cleve Abbott Papers, TUA, 1 p.
- <sup>15</sup> Ed Temple and B'Lou Carter, *Only the Pure in Heart Survive*, Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1980, 19. At this point, women were not allowed to run the 200 meters in the Olympics because of sport executives' fear that they were not physiologically suited for middle or long-distance running.
- <sup>16</sup> Ed Temple interview with Anne Blaschke, October 23, 2008, interview in author's possession.
- <sup>17</sup> McKissack came from Detroit, MI.
- <sup>18</sup> Gloria McKissack interview with James Haney, "Comments with Dr. James Haney Presents," WNAB, Channel 58 and WUXP, Channel 30 and WZTV, Channel 17, Nashville, TN, 2003. McKissack and Haney are TSU History Department professors. 6-min. clip. For more on 20<sup>th</sup> century, race-based commercialization, see: Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. New York: Vintage, 1999.
- <sup>19</sup> David Halberstam, "Downtown Area Stores Scene of More Sit-Ins," *The Nashville Tennessean*, April 12, 1960, p. 1. Box 177, Folder: "Research Material (2 of 2)," David Halberstam Collection, HGARC at BU.  
For a regional analog (East Tennessee), see, Merrill Proudfoot, *Diary of a Sit-In*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962, p. 5. Proudfoot ministered at Knoxville College, where he participated in sit-ins in 1961 to desegregate Knoxville. He notes that white students from the University of Tennessee also participated in black non-violent protest. Also: Proudfoot discusses the Nashville movement led by the NAACP, parents, and NCLC lawyers and ministers to integrate public elementary and secondary schools in the late Fifties. Their efforts resulted in the "Nashville Plan," a gradualist solution highly unsatisfactory to most blacks, but that became a model for other southern cities.
- <sup>20</sup> The Nashville CRM, in its first mid-1950s phase, integrated its schools via the "Nashville Plan," a rolling setup that most black activists found unsatisfactory, although it became a model for other southern cities. Note—though many lunch counters

desegregated in 1960, stubborn holdouts like Krystal Burgers refused to integrate until 1964 or 1965.

- <sup>21</sup> See: Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005, chap. 1; Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* Vol. 91, No. 4, March 2005, pp. 1233-1263; Bernice McNair Barrett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Jun., 1993), pp. 162-182.
- <sup>22</sup> Ed Temple interview with Rachel Lawson, August 11, 2003, Copyright Nashville Public Library.
- <sup>23</sup> TLS to MLK from KMS, August 8, 1955. Box 52, Folder 3, Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection 127, HGARC at BU.
- <sup>24</sup> On contributions of Nash, along with other women civil rights activists such as Septima Clark, Daisy Bates, JoAnn Robinson, Georgia Gilmore, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and Ella Baker, see Bernice McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 2, June 1993, pp. 162-182. On women's civil rights movement historiography, particularly in biography, see: Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003; Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.
- <sup>25</sup> David Halberstam, "Negroes Seek Merchant Talks," *The Nashville Tennessean*, April 7, 1960, p. 1. Box 177, Folder: "Research Material (2 of 2)," David Halberstam Collection, HGARC at BU.
- <sup>26</sup> Don H. Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985, p. 249. Also, see: Linda T. Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day: The Nashville Sit-Ins, February 13-May 10, 1960," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. L, No. 1, Spring 1991, p. 43. Box 180, Folder: Tennessee Historical Quarterly, David Halberstam Collection, HGARC at BU.
- <sup>27</sup> Transcript, "Interview with David Halberstam by Ward Just," Tape 2, Side 1, New York, New York, March 6, 1973, p. 19. Box 61, David Halberstam Collection, HGARC at BU.
- <sup>28</sup> For example, police arrested 48 A&I; 22 Fisk; and 19 ABTS students during a February 1960 sit-in. See: Tear sheet, "Tennessean, February 29, 1961 List of Arrested," *The Nashville Tennessean*, pagination not included. Box 177, Folder: "Research material," David Halberstam Collection, HGARC at BU.
- <sup>29</sup> Joseph Roberts interview with Anne Blaschke, June 8, 2010, interview in author's possession.
- <sup>30</sup> Joseph Roberts interview with Anne Blaschke, June 8, 2010, interview in author's possession.
- <sup>31</sup> Wilma Rudolph and Bud Greenspan, *Wilma*, New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1977, p. 7.

- <sup>32</sup> Wilma Rudolph and Bud Greenspan, *Wilma*, New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1977, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>33</sup> Wilma Rudolph and Bud Greenspan, *Wilma*, New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1977, pp. 13-14.
- <sup>34</sup> Wilma Rudolph and Bud Greenspan, *Wilma*, New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1977, p. 8.
- <sup>35</sup> Wilma Rudolph and Bud Greenspan, *Wilma*, New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1977, p. 21.
- <sup>36</sup> Anne Moody, *Coming of Age In Mississippi*, New York: Laurel, 1968, p. 129.
- <sup>37</sup> Willye White interview with Louise Mead Tricard: Louise Mead Tricard, *American Women's Track and Field: A History, 1895-1980*, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1996, p. 371. Also, see: Pat Jordan, "From the Land of Cotton," *Sports Illustrated*, December 8, 1975. White lived in Greenwood, MS.
- <sup>38</sup> Wilma Rudolph and Bud Greenspan, *Wilma* New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1977, p. 27. As an adult, Rudolph lamented the whitewashed "Negro History" that Burt High School taught: "[T]here's no excuse whatsoever for a black kid in Tennessee being in the sixth grade and not knowing a thing about slavery in America."
- <sup>39</sup> Joseph Roberts interview with author, June 8, 2010, interview in author's possession.
- <sup>40</sup> Activists included boycotting in their definition of nonviolent direct action. The Tigerbelles participated in Nashville's 1961 and 1963 boycotts of discriminatory stores. Confrontational NDA comprised sit-ins, picketing, integrating municipal and interstate public transportation, and other actions in which protesters faced the public and anticipated a negative reaction that would dramatize injustice.
- <sup>41</sup> Transcript of Ed Temple interview with Rachel Lawson, August 11, 2003, Copyright 2003 by the Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee, p. 22.
- <sup>42</sup> David Karen, "The Politics of Class, Race and Gender: Access to Higher Education in the United States, 1960-1986," *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 99, No. 2, February 1999, pp. 211, 212. On adolescents' educations in the early '20<sup>th</sup> century, see: Susan Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 24.
- <sup>43</sup> Susan Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 72. (This is about the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. But see chapters 4-10, along with conclusion, for more on this.) Also, see Wini Breines on 1950s teen race-based gender standards and their translation at the college level. Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- <sup>44</sup> Ed Temple interview with Rachel Lawson, August 11, 2003, Copyright 2003 by the Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.
- <sup>45</sup> "4 A&I Students May Be Expelled," *Nashville Tennessean*, April 13, 1960, p. 1. Box 177, Folder: Research Material (2 of 2), David Halberstam Collection, HGARC at

- BU. Also, see Lovett, p. 164: "And in Tennessee, where most of the Negro students involved in the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides attended Tennessee A&I State University, the state commissioner of education notified public college presidents of new rules approved in April to expel any student arrested and convicted of breaking laws, missing classes, or engaging in bad personal contact." American Baptist Theological Seminary and Fisk administrators did not punish their students for participating. [May 1961]
- <sup>46</sup> Halberstam transcript [holograph], "Interview with Reverend James Lawson," Box 175, Folder: Jim Lawson, p. 6, David Halberstam Collection, BU at HGARC. Here Lawson emphasizes that physical harm or imprisonment were not deterrents to Nashville student activists in 1960-61.
- <sup>47</sup> Lovett, p. 166. "When some of the original Freedom Riders came back to Nashville by car on about May 22, they appeared bruised, battered, and quite shaken by the ordeal. Upon returning to the Tennessee A&I campus, Curtis Murphy told anxious reporters that the Freedom Rides would continue despite Robert Kennedy's pleas that they stop lest more violence occur."
- <sup>48</sup> "David Halberstam interview with Diane Nash, notes," Box 244, Folder: Notebooks—"Churchuell [SW illegible]"—"Diane Nash 1995." B244 F8, David Halberstam Collection, HGARC at BU.
- <sup>49</sup> Gloria McKissack interview with James Haney, "Comments with Dr. James Haney Presents," WNAB, Channel 58 and WUXP, Channel 30 and WZTV, Channel 17, Nashville, Tennessee, 2003. McKissack and Haney were both professors in the History Department at TSU. 10 min clip.
- <sup>50</sup> Wyomia Tyus interview with Anne Blaschke, March 6, 2009, interview in author's possession.
- <sup>51</sup> Transcript of Ed Temple with Rachel Lawson interview, p. 10.
- <sup>52</sup> Linda T. Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day: The Nashville Sit-Ins, February 13-May 10, 1960. *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. L, No. 1, Spring 1991, p. 50, in Box 180, Folder: Tennessee Historical Quarterly, David Halberstam Collection, HGARC at BU. [Wynn cites Louis E. Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, New York, 1962, p. 142.]
- <sup>53</sup> Ed Temple interview with Anne Blaschke, October 23, 2008, interview in author's possession.
- <sup>54</sup> On April 1963 Nashville Boycott, see Lovett, p. 180.
- <sup>55</sup> Ed Temple interview with Anne Blaschke, October 23, 2008, interview in author's possession.
- <sup>56</sup> Ed Temple interview with Anne Blaschke, October 23, 2008, interview in author's possession.
- <sup>57</sup> Earl Clanton, III, "Sports Splatter: Going...Going...BIG TIME," *Tennessee A. and I. State University Bulletin*, Volume XLIV corr. Vol. 49, No. 3, November 1961, Pp. 11-12. TSU. Ralph Boston, an A&I classmate of Rudolph's, won the long jump gold medal at Rome. He remains the school's most successful male trackster.
- <sup>58</sup> See 1960 AAU Annual Report and Amateur Athlete, TSU statistical information. Earlene Brown, who placed third in shot put, won the remaining U.S. women's track and field medal.

- <sup>59</sup> Of 18 competitors, six were white women. AAU 1960 statistics; Louise Mead Tri-card, *American Women's Track and Field: a History, 1895-1980*, Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1996, p. 406.
- <sup>60</sup> Postwar Olympic years: 1960, 33 percent white; 1956, 55 percent white; 1952, 60 percent white; 1948, 48 percent white.
- <sup>61</sup> While the "classic" phase is often cited as beginning at , other scholars trace its grass-roots start at the Emmett Till case/spring and summer of 1955. See: Hall, Payne, Branch, Klarman etc. (George Lee d. May 7, 1955; Emmet Till d. August 28, 1955; *Brown v. Board* (1954)—*Griffin v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (1955); MBB, December 1-2, 1955).
- <sup>62</sup> "Plans Set for AAU Convention [Women's Track and Field section]," *Amateur Athlete*, Vol. 31, No. 10, October 1960, p. 17, AAU.
- <sup>63</sup> "Tennessee State University: Olympic Gold Medal Winners [pamphlet]," pp. 3-5, 7; Tigerbelles Vertical File, TSU.

# Back to the Roots of the Civil Right Movement: A Photo Essay

BY BUFFY D. LORD

**A**lthough the import of certain events is not often known for decades or centuries, there are some moments immediately recognizable as representing a sea change in society. The American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s is just such a moment. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was not the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in America, nor was it the end. As recent events have highlighted, there remains much to be done in America relative to equal protection under the law and societal prejudices.

Over the past two years and in conjunction with a number of significant anniversaries in the American Civil Rights Movement, MCLA facilitated the “Creating Equality” series in which faculty and students explored the meaning of equality in society, examined the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, and engaged in discourse about the current state of the Movement.

As part of the Creating Equality series, professors Frances Jones-Sneed and Ely Janis led a class on a bus tour of significant sites in the American Civil Rights Movement throughout the Southeast. The tour allowed students to experience history first-hand by meeting “foot soldiers” of the Movement, those ordinary women and men who rose up to challenge state-sanctioned and state-supported racism, and to visit historical sites important to the Movement. The class not only taught students about the past, but inspired them to continue the fight.

This essay is organized with a daily reflection as provided by a student during the trip, a brief description of what we did and saw each day, and concludes with an essay containing our reflections both on the class and where society and the Movement stands today.

## DAY 1

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“I get the opportunity [because of the trip] to be in the Movement—meet the people and see the places in Greensboro that are part of our shared history—not just be a passive reader of history.”

*Samantha St. Pierre, MCLA Class of 2014*

*Samantha St. Pierre, with Mrs. Juanita Abernathy*

While we were in Greensboro, NC, we visited the International Civil Rights Museum located in the Woolworth five-and-dime made famous by four young men from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College (David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., and Joseph McNeil). On Feb. 1, 1960, the Greensboro Four sat at the

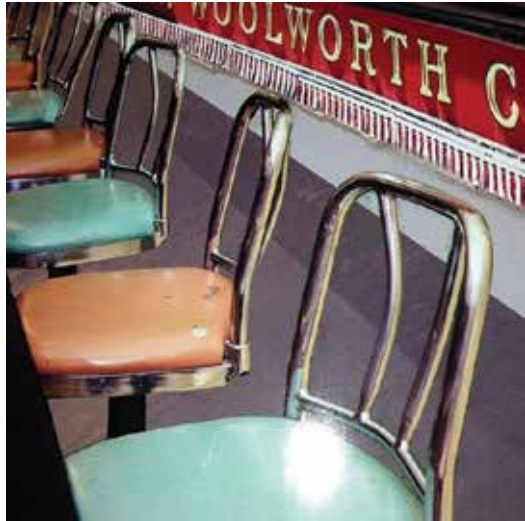


*Woolworth's, which is now is the home of the International Civil Rights Museum.*



Woolworth “whites only” lunch counter, seeking to be served. They remained until closing, without service. The next day, and with each passing day, more students joined the protest. Lunch counter sit-ins spread across the South, receiving significant media attention and financially crippling the Woolworth’s lunch counter, eventually helping to force the desegregation of places of public accommodation.

*The restored Woolworth’s stools - representing the stage for the sit-in.*



*MCLA group in front of International Civil Rights Museum, Greensboro, NC.*



*Statue “February One” designed by James Barnhill and located at North Carolina’s A&T campus, the school attended by the four men.*

The depth of the segregation of places we consider public (in the sense that all members of the public are welcome) surprised students. While at the museum, students commented on the difficulty of travel for blacks during segregation—not knowing where you could stop for lodging, gas, food or even for a restroom. The museum had a copy of a Greenbook, a travel guide for blacks during segregation. Pittsfield, MA, had a listing for lodging at 53 King St., which surprised students who had not considered that Massachusetts was also segregated; viewing it as a “Southern” thing.

We tend to view segregation and denial of service as remnants of the past; however,

the issues still exist today. We have seen issues of access relative to blacks and pools recently in McKinney, TX. Likewise, we have seen prejudice cloaked as “religious freedom” in recent attempts to deny service to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, and Queer (LGBTQ) community.

*Street sign commemorating the historic start date of the Woolworth’s sit-in.*



## DAY 2

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“Strength, endurance, and [a] positive spirit is a great way to describe the activists of the Civil Rights Movement. People like Mrs. Abernathy are an inspiration to us all and a reminder of the power we hold when we unite together as one.”

*Jamie Burdick, MCLA Class of 2016*

On the second day of our trip, we were in Atlanta, GA. The day began with a visit to the Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) National Historic Site. The site includes the restored birthplace of MLK, the “old” Ebenezer Baptist Church, the “new” Ebenezer Baptist Church, a reflecting pool with the tombs of MLK and Mrs. Coretta Scott King, and a visitor’s center. We then had the distinct and amazing pleasure of meeting Mrs. Juanita Abernathy, a civil rights activist in her own right, who was married to the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, who co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with MLK.

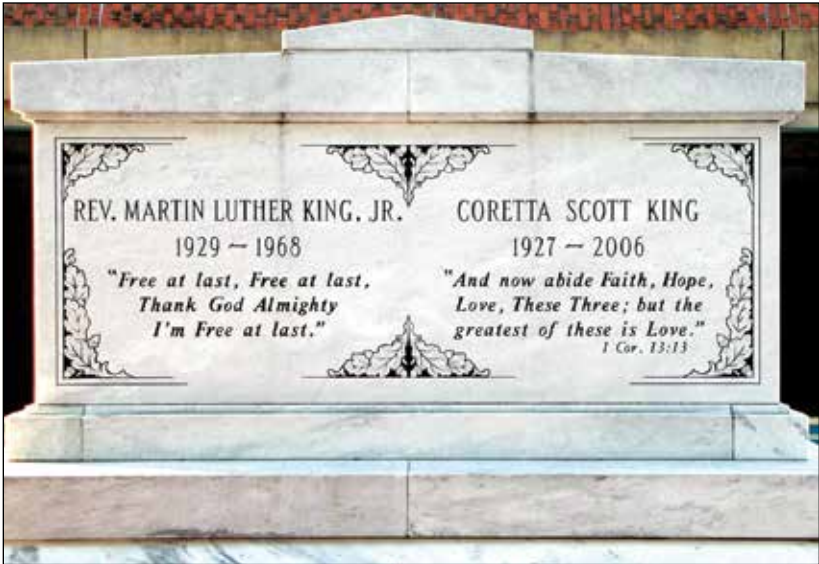


*Sign for the “old” Ebenezer Baptist Church, where one can sit in the restored sanctuary and listen to recordings of MLK speeches.*



*"Behold," sculpted by Patrick Morelli and unveiled in 1990, is a tribute to the enduring inspiration of those fighting for social change, dignity, and human rights. The statue is a depiction of the African ritual lifting of a newborn to the heavens while saying "Behold the only thing greater than yourself."*





*The tomb of MLK and Mrs. King.*

*Sign from MLK's Center for Social Change.*





*Abernathy home in Montgomery, AL.*



Meeting Mrs. Abernathy was inspiring and timely. She focused on the power of the vote and the barriers to voter access present in the 1960s and today. Much of her ire was directed at voter apathy and a lack of recognition of the power of the vote. Calling access to the vote a “blood ballot,” she focused on the fact that people died in the fight to register and vote—the dues have been paid and we cannot take that lightly. To paraphrase Mrs. Abernathy, “If you stand up to the bully and let them know you are not afraid, the bully will often back down because their strength comes from your fear. If you show fear, the strength of the bully will grow and your power will diminish.”

Access to voting and the polls is currently under attack with the gutting of the Voting Rights Act, banning of same day voter registration, and new attempts to require voter identification, all of which disproportionately affect the poor and persons of color. We must be vigilant to ensure that all citizens have access to government and their vote.



*Photograph from the SPLC of a young girl in Birmingham participating in a protest.*

# DAY 3

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“Singing with Rutha Harris was the most soulful and uplifting experience. Ms. Harris reminded me how powerful music can be and how passion can move a nation.”

*Samantha Beaton, MCLA Class of 2017*



*Ms. Rutha Harris, one of the original Freedom Singers.*



On day three, we ventured to Albany, GA. While in Albany, we visited the Charles Sherrod Civil Rights Park and walked in the footsteps of those who marched in the Dec. 13, 1961, protest. Rev. Sherrod was an organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and leader in the Albany Movement. The “Albany Movement” was the work of multiple civil rights organizations, including the SCLC and SNCC. The main focus was, as in many other areas, voter registration drives. The police chief in Albany was mindful of the images coming out of Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery, and, as such, had instructed his officers to avoid engaging in the physical altercations that marked other protests. The jail conditions for those arrested, outside of the prying eyes of the media, remained terrible.

We then met Ms. Rutha Harris, who was one of the original Freedom Singers. In 1962, the Freedom Singers were formed through the work of SNCC in Albany, to spread the message of the Movement while providing inspiration and a source of strength. The Freedom Singers also were important to raise funds for the Movement. The Freedom Singers performed, notably, at the 1963 March on Washington and the 1963 Newport Folk Festival, and traveled through 46 states.

Singing with Ms. Harris was a powerful experience—there were moments when it was as though you could feel the notes, and not just hear them. It was surprising how quickly she had a group of non-singers “singing,” if not well, then loudly. The songs, while deceptively simple, conveyed a strong message of unity, equality, and struggle. Singing together brought a strong and immediate sense of community to the group, and demonstrated the power of song and importance of song in the political process. Too often we ignore the power of “non-political speech” and the messages contained in that speech. There is meaning and power in all art and song and the choices an artist makes. There also is meaning in the exclusion of particular groups in the realm of entertainment. There is a lack of roles for people of color or other “minority” groups (such as LGTBQ and women), and the roles that do exist are often minor roles that perpetuates stereotypes of these groups.



*Charles Sherrod Civil Rights  
Park in Albany, GA.*

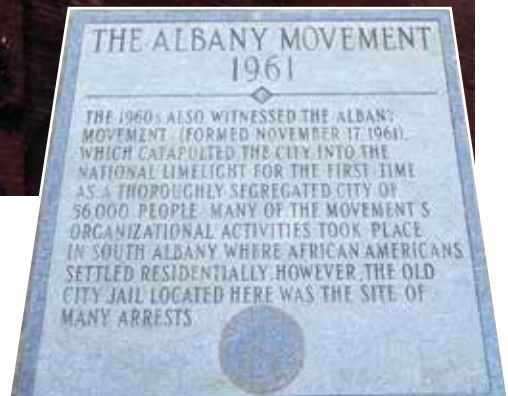
*Footstep memorial in Albany,  
GA, near Charles Sherrod  
Civil Rights Park.*



*On the way to Selma, this intersection sits by the Holt Street Baptist Church. It seems to be a juxtaposition of two warring cultures and views of history.*



*Old Mount Zion Church in Albany, GA.*



## DAY 4

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“It was surreal riding around the poorer parts of Selma, Alabama. You can vividly see the aftermath of slavery and how it affected [and continues to affect] African American people and their communities.”

*Rashard Taylor, MCLA Class of 2014.*

We started the next day on the road from Montgomery to Selma. On the road, we stopped at the Loundes Interpretational Center which featured an exhibit focused on Bloody Sunday and the eventually successful march from Selma to Montgomery. The building was designed to mirror the silhouette of the Old Brown Chapel in Selma. The same building outline was evident in other churches we visited, including the Old Mount Zion Church in Albany, GA.

*Brown Chapel, Selma, AL.*



*Loundes Interpretational Center*

Once in Selma, the divide between white and black remains evident more than 50 years after Bloody Sunday. We went to the Ebenezer Baptist Church, which is in a dilapidated part of the city. The homes in the area were small and in obvious disrepair. There were a number of abandoned and burned-out structures. When we met with Rev. Frederick Reese of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, as well as former Mayor James Perkins, we were told that the area was not even paved or on public water and sewer until after Rev. Reese was elected to the City Council in 1972.



*Homes in  
Selma, AL.*







*Edmund Pettis Bridge, the site of Bloody Sunday and of the Mar. 21, 1965, successful march to Montgomery.*

In the mid-1960s Rev. Reese was active in the voter registration movement and was president of the Dallas County Voter's League. He participated in the Bloody Sunday march of Mar. 7, 1965. Following the violence at the Edmund Pettis Bridge, a large number of the marchers gathered at the Brown Chapel AME Church where Rev. Reese addressed the crowd. On Mar. 21, 1965, Rev. Reese marched hand-in-hand with MLK as they crossed the Edmund Pettis Bridge on the road to Montgomery. More than 50,000 people participated in the successful march from Selma to Montgomery. When he spoke to us, Rev. Reese, in the style of a sermon, exhorted all of those present to remain active in the quest for civil rights, and reminded us all to strive for excellence and equality.

*Rev. Reese with MCLA alumna  
Laini Sporbert, '92.*



While former Mayor Perkins echoed all that we heard previously, he brought a unique perspective. He was a young man on Bloody Sunday, and his middle-class parents forbade him from participating in any way in the planned march. After he heard about the violence at the bridge, he disobeyed his parents, running to the scene and watching it unfold. Witnessing such an event shaped his path. Mr. Perkins became politically active while young and has remained so. He ran Rev. Reese's unsuccessful mayoral campaign in 1984 and ran himself, unsuccessfully, in both 1992 and 1996. Following his 1996 loss, Perkins filed a campaign contest, alleging that Mayor Joe Smitherman, who had served as mayor since before Bloody Sunday, had committed voter fraud. The challenge resulted in a settlement under which an election commission was set up to ensure election integrity. Perkins was elected the first black mayor of Selma in 2000 and was re-elected to office in 2004. Mr. Perkins' love for Selma and his obvious sadness about the present conditions of the city were apparent as he spoke.



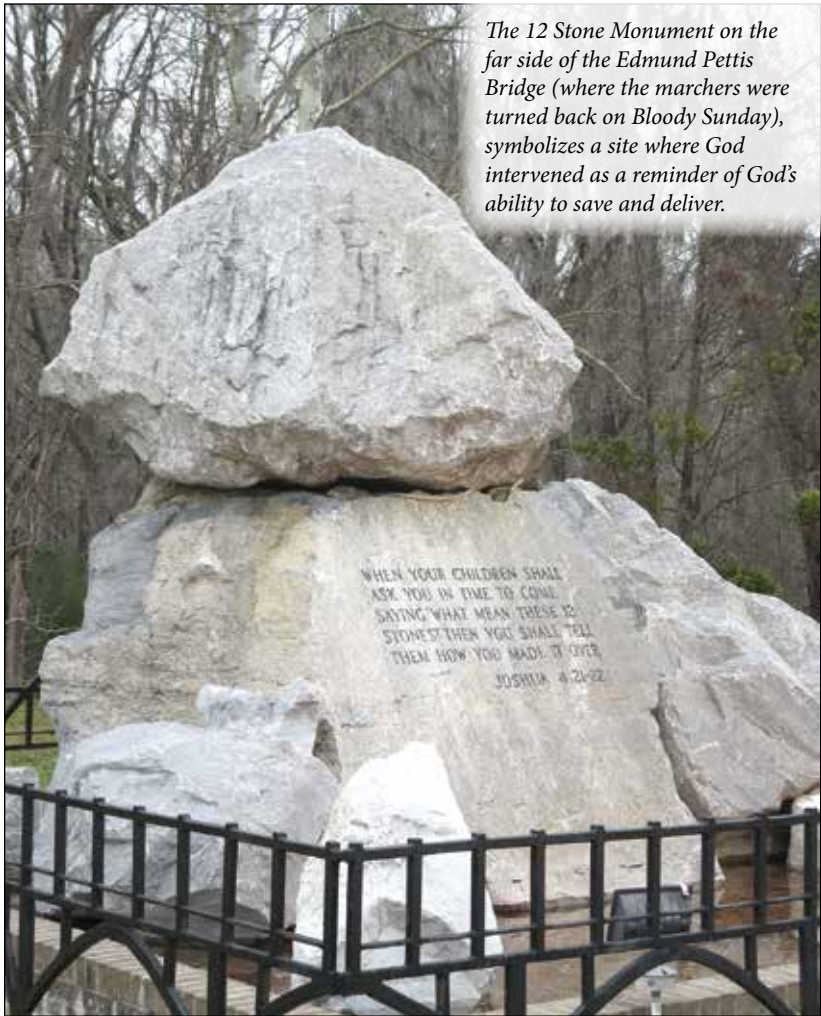
*Former Mayor Perkins*



*Ms. Joanne Bland, Selma, AL.*

After leaving the Ebenezer Baptist Church, we met Ms. Joanne Bland, who took us on a brief tour of Selma, capped by a group march over the Edmund Pettis Bridge. The drive through the city reinforced our earlier observations of a stratified city—split by race and class—marked by highs, including the successful march to Montgomery, and lows, including unabated poverty. At the far side of the Edmund Pettis Bridge there is a small voting rights museum and a park

dedicated to the martyrs of the movement. On the ride back to Montgomery, we stopped at the memorial to Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, a martyr in the movement who was murdered by Klu Klux Klan (KKK) members while she shuttled marchers back to Selma following the completion of the march.



*The 12 Stone Monument on the far side of the Edmund Pettis Bridge (where the marchers were turned back on Bloody Sunday), symbolizes a site where God intervened as a reminder of God's ability to save and deliver.*

*Six-part mural outside of the Voting Rights Museum in Selma, AL.*





The day spent in Selma was powerful. The juxtaposition of progress and an utter lack of progress were apparent. For those on the trip who had never spent time in the South, the level of obvious poverty and continued segregation were surprising. While poverty and racism remain a problem everywhere, the obvious poverty and the openness with which racism exists in the South startled many on the trip.

*Memorial to Viola Liuzzo  
at the site of her murder  
by KKK members while  
she shuttled marchers from  
Montgomery back to Selma.*



## DAY 5

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"I think this trip is about learning not to inhibit ourselves as a planet. None of us are free until all of us are free."

*Ben Hoyt, MCLA Class of 2014*

We started the next day in Montgomery, AL, with visits to multiple sites. The Rosa Parks Museum highlights Ms. Parks and the role of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the Civil Rights Movement. While Rosa Parks was not the first to refuse to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus (Ms. Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old Montgomery resident was arrested earlier, in 1955), it was her arrest that sparked a bus boycott. The boycott lasted 381 days with boycotters using an organized system of carpools to avoid using the busses. It proved effective, in large part due to the economic losses to the transit companies caused by the loss of black riders. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was a victory, but again, in one narrow area (intra-state travel). Through the success of the boycott, additional segregationist laws relative to public accommodation and socializing between whites and blacks were enacted. The museum was well organized, and highlighted how, in gaining access to all aspects of life, each victory was a stepping stone to the next, and key to the Movement.



*Rashard Taylor '14 at the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery, AL.*

Our visit to the capitol building again highlighted the odd openness with which the South embraces what most Northerners view as racist and treasonous symbols of the past. There are monuments to Confederate generals and the Confederate dead throughout the South, many on government property. The Mississippi flag incorporates the Confederate flag, as did the Georgia flag until 2001, and the flag flies over the Texas State Capitol.

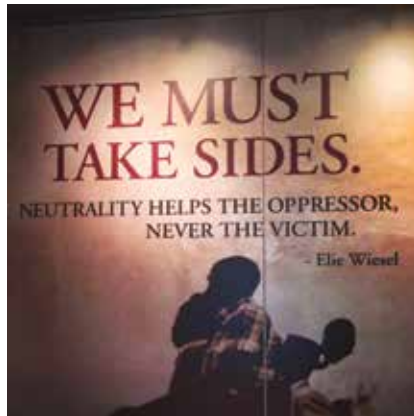
At the Alabama capitol building, the flag does not fly “over” the capitol, but is immediately adjacent to it, and is part of a large monument to the Confederate dead from each branch of service—complete with multiple “Confederate” flags. Recent events have brought renewed focus on the embracing of Confederate symbols and the reverence with which “Southern heritage” is treated. Many have argued that the Confederate flag is not, in and of itself, a racist symbol. However, those arguments ignore the use of this flag by white supremacist groups as a symbol of “white power,” and an instrument to instill fear. They also ignored the timing of many of these “monuments,” many of which were constructed in the 1950s and 1960s in direct response to the Civil Rights Movement.



*Confederate Monument on Capitol Hill in Montgomery, AL. The monument was dedicated in 1898. On June 24, 2015, Alabama Governor Robert Bentley ordered the removal of the four Confederate flags from the memorial in response to growing national controversy over the display of the Confederate flag on public property.*



We also stopped at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) in Montgomery. The SPLC was founded in 1971 by two civil rights lawyers, Morris Dees and Joseph Levin, Jr., and is dedicated to fight hate and bigotry in all forms, and to seek equal justice and equal opportunity for all, including the most vulnerable members, of our society. The SPLC “continues the march,” working to ensure that the promises of the Civil Rights Movement become a reality. The SPLC uses a multitude of tools, including litigation, to make a difference.



*Displays at the SPLC in Montgomery, AL.*

Outside the SPLC is a powerful monument to milestones in the Movement created by Maya Lin, who also created the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington D.C. The memorial honors the achievements and the martyrs of the Movement, between the Supreme Court’s momentous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, and the assassination of MLK in 1968. There is a gap; however, between the first and last entries on the timeline, which was meant to signify that the struggle for human rights began long before 1954, and continues today. The memorial consists of a circular, black granite table, engraved with the history of the Movement. Water flows from its center, and moves evenly across the top. A curved, black granite wall behind the table is engraved with MLK’s paraphrase of Amos 5:24, [we will not be satisfied] “Until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Visitors are encouraged to touch the engraved names on the monument. Lin envisioned the memorial as “a contemplative area—a place to remember the Civil Rights Movement, to honor those killed during

the struggle, to appreciate how far the country has come in its quest for equality, and to consider how far it has to go.” When standing at the monument and reading the engraving, I was struck how there seemed to be “two steps forward and one step back.” While each victory was present, it often was bookended by acts of violence and fear mongering. Recent events, again, bring home the fact that the Movement and associated violence is not over and the march does, in fact, continue.



*Monument to milestones in the Movement created by Maya Lin, at the Southern Poverty Law Center.*





## DAY 6

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“This trip reinforced for me the moral obligation we each have to engage in civil disobedience when we know a law is bad or unjust.”

*Owain Forbes, MCLA Class of 2015.*

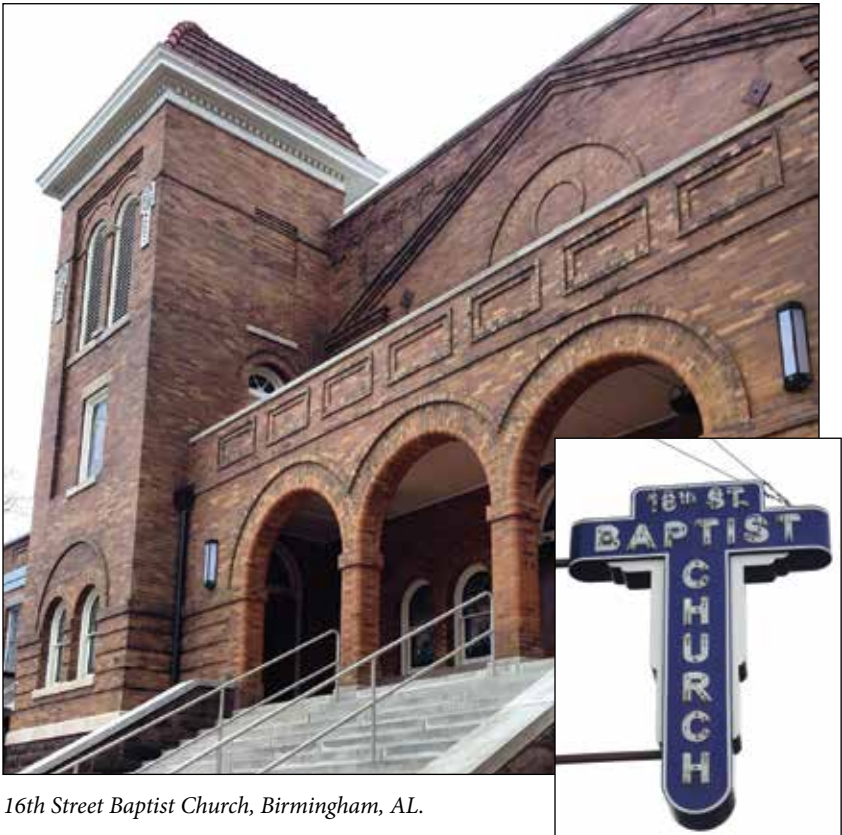
*Owain Forbes with Ms. Lisa McNair in Birmingham.*

In Birmingham, we met with Ms. Lisa McNair and Dr. Carolyn McKinstry. Ms. McNair’s sister, Denise, was one of four young girls murdered in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church on Sept. 15, 1963, and Dr. McKinstry was at the church for services at the time of the bombing. Both were powerful speakers on the issue of reconciliation, with both the past, and between individuals and societies. Dr. McKinstry, a friend of the murdered girls, went on to be an active participant in marches in Birmingham. She authored a book, *While the World Watched*, which provides the perspective of a child who eyewitnesses many of the most violent aspects of the Movement. She survived the bombing of her church, as well as the dogs and water hoses used by Bull Connor’s police force.



*Rashard Taylor '14 with Ms. Lisa McNair and Dr. Carolyn McKinstry.*

We then went to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, which sits across from both the 16th Street Baptist Church and Kelly Ingram Park. The Civil Rights Institute provided a real sense of time and place. The exhibits included contemporary news reports. As always, when confronted with images and statements from the time, I am struck by the arguments set forth by those against integration. I often wonder how they and their descendants view those interviews and images. Are they embarrassed by the viewpoints expressed? Are they proud? How far have their positions evolved, if at all. The park was renovated and rededicated in 1992 as “A Place of Revolution and Reconciliation,” and is filled with statues that commemorate different moments in the Movement in Birmingham. Most notably, the installations bring to life the especially violent tactics employed by Police Chief Bull Connor, including water cannons and dogs, in attempts to quash the demonstrations.



*16th Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, AL.*



*Birmingham Civil Rights Institute*



*Entrance to Kelly Ingram Park, Birmingham, AL.*





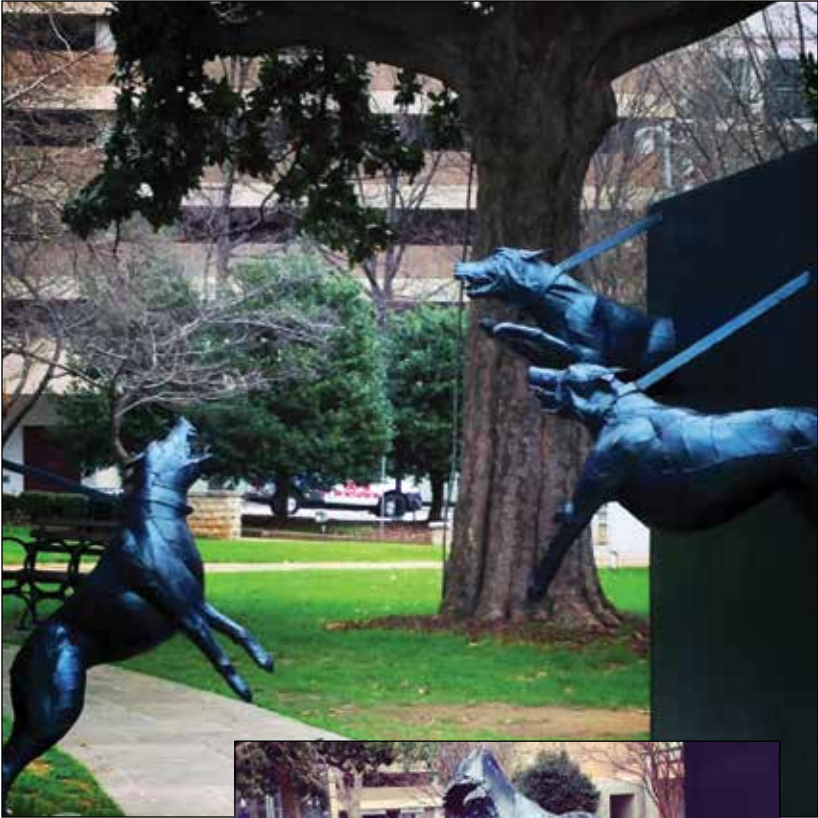
*Memorial to the four young girls, Addie Mae Collins (14), Carol Denise McNair (11), Carole Robertson (14), and Cynthia Wesley (14), who were killed in the September 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church.*



*Statue dedicated to the "Foot Soldiers" of the Birmingham Movement.*



*Representation of "Bull Connor's dogs."*



*Representation of "Bull  
Connor's dogs."*





Artwork representing the Children’s March. The path runs between them and the perspective changes to show the children in jail, depending on which side of the path you are on.





*Water cannons aimed at protesters.*





*Statue based upon the Reverends N.H. Smith, Jr, A.D. King, and John T. Porter, who led a march in Birmingham on Palm Sunday 1963 to support the Reverends Martin Luther King, Jr, Fred Shuttlesworth and Ralph Abernathy, who were in jail.*

## DAY 7

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“On this trip we learned that it only takes one person’s courage and conviction to initiate change, but that it also takes strength, determination, spirituality, and a commitment to nonviolence to accomplish [that change]. We must never forget the sacrifices made” by those that came before us.

*Kelle Hostetter, MCLA Class of 2014*

*Melissa Gelpi, MCLA Class of 2015.*



*Kelle Hostetter '14 with Mrs.  
Juanita Abernathy.*



*Melissa Gelpi '15 with Dr.  
Cynthia McKinstry.*

On the last day of our trip, we made it to Nashville, where we met with Ernest “Rip” Patton, a Nashville freedom rider and member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Despite Supreme Court rulings banning segregation in interstate travel as early as the 1940s, segregation remained a fact in interstate busing throughout the South. Beginning in 1961, the Freedom Riders challenged unlawful segregated interstate busing by riding interstate buses in the South in mixed racial groups. The riders called national attention to the disregard for federal law and the violence used to enforce segregation throughout the South. Riders often were arrested and served significant jail time for participation in the Freedom Rides.

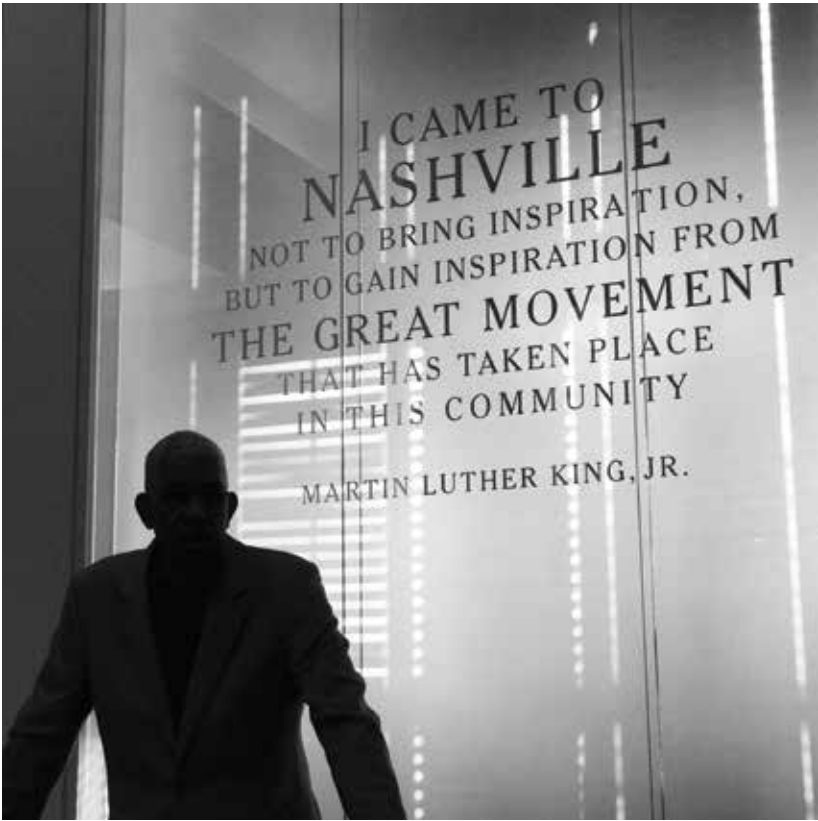
Mr. Patton was a 21-year-old Tennessee State student when he became involved in the Movement. He participated in the Freedom Ride from Mont-

gomery, AL, to Jackson, MS. He was arrested and served 45 days in jail, including some time in the notorious Parchman State Prison Farm. In addition, he was expelled from college for participating in the rides. Mr. Patton continues to be engaged in his community and work for voting access and a living wage for all.



*Ernest “Rip” Patton with MCLA alumna Laini Sporbett, ’92.*





*Ernest “Rip” Patton speaking about the Nashville Movement.*

## FINAL THOUGHTS:

Since this trip there have been so many events across the United States which demonstrate just how much remains to be done relative to civil rights: Freddie Gray; Eric Garner; Ferguson, Missouri; the Charleston Nine; Trayvon Martin; Tamir Rice; and the list goes on, and on, and on. It is so easy to think that the problems are behind us—that the effects of slavery and institutional racism are over. But the reality is that we are a stratified and divided society. It seems to me that the issue of civil rights is, at its heart, about access; access to education, government (both at the ballot box and positions of power), health care, public accommodation and transport, and justice.

The information is out there, but many choose to ignore it because it is “uncomfortable” or “too difficult.” Yes, facing problems and working to resolve them (or at least move toward resolution) is difficult, but it is something we must do as a society. As long as we are fearful of the discussion, and what it reveals to the world about ourselves, we will never move forward. It is difficult to have the conversation. We all fear being trite, saying the wrong thing, or offending. In writing this article about our trip, I struggled with what to say, how to say it, and how to convey the depth of emotion this trip stirred in all of us who went. While working on the article, I had a disagreement with someone about the propriety of the placement of Confederate symbols on government property. While I cannot say that I changed their mind, I was not silent. I did not “let it pass” to avoid the uncomfortable discussion. That is what we must all do. We must force the conversation. Silence and inaction equal complicity. Do not be complicit.



*On our arrival home.*

# Emmet Till: Race and the Geography of Place

FRANCES JONES-SNEED, PH.D.

*You know, it may sound funny, but I love the South. I don't choose to live anywhere else. There's land here, where a man can raise coffee, and I'm going to do that some day. There are lakes where a man can sink a hook and fight a bass.... There is room here for my children to play and grow, and become good citizens—if the white man will let them. ... I'll be damned ... if I'm going to let the white man beat me. There's something out there that I've got to do for my kids, and I'm not going to stop until I've done it.”<sup>1</sup>*

In a 1971 lecture Ralph Ellison said that he “was struck by the ironic fact that in this country, where Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory of the frontier has been so influential in shaping our conception of American history, very little attention has been given to the role played by geography in shaping the fate of Afro-Americans.”<sup>2</sup> Ellison believed in the axiom “geography is fate.” He demonstrated the truth of the maxim by explaining the differences between himself and Richard Wright.

Wright grew up in a part of what was the old Confederacy, while I grew up in a state (Oklahoma) which possesses no indigenous tra-

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<sup>1</sup> Evers, Medgar. “Why I Live In Mississippi.” *Ebony*, September, 1963, 44.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 111.

dition of chattel slavery. Thus, while we both grew up in segregated societies, mine lacked many of the intensities of custom, tradition, and manners which “Colored” the institutions of the Old South, and which were important in shaping Wright’s point of view. Both of us were descendants of slaves, but since my civic, geographical and political circumstances were different from those of Mississippi Wright and I were united by our connection with a past condition of servitude, and divided by geography and a difference of experience based thereupon.<sup>3</sup>

This is a very important question. How does geography impact and color one’s memory of place? Ellison continued to believe in this axiom until his death and by extension probably so did Richard Wright. Ellison, similar to W.E.B. DuBois before him, perceived the geography of his birth to be a liberating force, whereas for Wright Mississippi was “a site of natural beauty and racial horror.”<sup>4</sup> Wright did not envision Mississippi as a safe space where racial redemption could occur. This question of geography and fate has made me curious about Mississippi, the place of my birth, and compelled me to question other black Mississippians about their thoughts on the subject. What does Mississippi mean to African Americans? What memories are evoked by the word *Mississippi*? Would answers echo Wright’s memories of violence, or would a different generation remember Mississippi differently?

William Ferris, in an interview on National Public Radio, volunteered his thoughts on African Americans’ sense of Southern identity: “I think the deepest and most Southern of all people are black people, and those black families who left the South carried what Faulkner referred to as his little postage stamp of native soil with them.”<sup>5</sup> In illustrating this point, he used an example from the black blues musician Muddy Waters, who migrated from Mississippi to Chicago in the 1950s yet grew cotton, corn, and okra in his backyard. “A little piece of his world from Stovall’s plantation in the Mississippi delta had been brought to Chicago along with his delta blues.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowing: The Black Migration Narrative*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> William Ferris Interview with Scott Simon, September 24, 2005, from *Weekend Edition Saturday*, National Public Radio.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

Black Mississippians' memories, while similar to those of other Southerners, both black and white, are unique because of the geographical, political, and historic times in which they lived. They were the last contingent of a long line of migrants who left the state; for them Mississippi was a place that was beginning to change in terms of political and economic opportunities, but many left for the same reasons that previous migrants did.

African Americans who migrated from Mississippi after 1950 continued to feel a strong attachment to the state because they realized that it provided them with a strong sense of family, community, and "an enormous richness and beauty to draw from."<sup>7</sup> Their memories included not only incidents of violence but also fragments of richness and beauty, especially in community and family relationships and the natural environment. One incident of violence, however, dominated the memories of this generation—the lynching of Emmett Till.

### **Emmett Till and the Geography of Place**

Emmett Till's murder served as a watershed in African American history. It radicalized a generation of black Mississippians and "pushed them toward political activism."<sup>8</sup> It also pushed scores of them to leave the state. The first migrants directly involved in the Till case as witnesses for the state were Moses Wright, his wife, and young children. They were the first casualties in the aftermath of the trial. Another witness, nineteen-year-old Willie Reed also left the state, along with a prominent black physician, T.R.M. Howard. All of these people's lives were threatened. Yet the majority never thought of leaving the state before Till's murder, although they had opportunities to do so.

African Americans have been migrating from the state of Mississippi since slavery. During slavery, strict laws were enacted for those who tried to escape as well as for those who assisted them. After slavery, blacks were in the vanguard of the westward movement to Kansas. One of the leaders of the Kansas Exodus was, like other emigrants, ambivalent about leaving the South. Pap Singleton said: "We don't want to leave the South, and just as soon as we have confidence in the South I am going to be an instrument in the hands of God to persuade every man to go back, because that is the best country; that is genial to our nature, we love that country, and it is the best country in the

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<sup>7</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of My Mothers Garden*, New York: Harvest Books, 1984, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Aldon Morris, *Origins of the Civil rights Movement*, New York: Free Press, 1986, p. 3.

world for us; but we are going to learn the South a lesson.”<sup>9</sup> The South and especially Mississippi did not learn the lesson that Singleton wanted—that blacks were valuable assets—so blacks continued to flee. There was a steady flow of migrants, called the Great Migration, which swelled between the two world wars. However, in 1954 things changed dramatically for African Americans in the country, when the *Brown* decision overturned legal segregation in education, which would be the beginning of the dismantling effects of Jim Crow. Yet the impact of the *Brown* case for black Mississippians would not be swift victory but, rather, swift retribution from white Mississippians who refused to give up their way of life. Fifteen months after the historic decision, the Till case became a blatant reminder for black Mississippians of what happened when they stepped out of their place.

There are certain historical events that live with us, such as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. Ask most Americans living in 1963 what they were doing when they heard the news of President Kennedy’s death and each will recall a significant memory and talk about its impact on their lives. There are other such events in all of our lives, yet for black Mississippians living in 1955, one incident is burned into their memories—not just the incident but an image and a name—and this was the lynching of Emmett Louis Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy. No other fourteen-year-old black boy has been so memorialized. Why is it that this black boy murdered by two white men in Money, MS, is so different from the thousands of other murdered black boys who came before or after him? What does the memory of this boy mean to black Mississippians who left the state after 1955? Did his murder influence their migration? Did it color their memories of the state? What impact did the murder have on their lives? Was fear for their safety a major motivation for leaving Mississippi? How did the Till case change their opinion about “home?” How did they define themselves before and after the incident?

Till’s murder had a direct effect on Moses Wright and his family, and Wright’s words echoed a clarion call for all Mississippians that times were changing, but also Till’s murder convinced Wright and a number of others that they could no longer remain in the state. Wright’s circumstances were very different from most black Mississippians who left during this period because a direct threat was made on his life. He was not the first to leave be-

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Singleton, Senate Report 693, III, p. 383, from Nell Painter, *The Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, p. 117.

cause of the threat of violence, and he would not be the last. Yet others left, not because their lives were threatened, but because they feared for the loss of their humanity, their sanity. Later, they also migrated for economic and educational advantages.

Murder of black people in Mississippi had happened before, but none got such international notoriety. There was a hope from the national black community that this case would be different—but as far as justice was concerned, it was not. The difference was in the actions of black Mississippians, the national and international press, groups like the NAACP, and most especially, Mamie Till Bradley, Emmett's mother. Mrs. Bradley spent her lifetime insuring that no one would forget her son or what happened to him in Money, MS. Even today, blacks shiver when they hear the word *Mississippi*, and they remember the large, bright eyes of a young boy and then his misshapen beaten body.

The murder of Emmett Till in 1955 served as a watershed for the post-World War II generation and demonstrated that Southern whites still used violence as a tool of terror—just as they did in the post-Civil War era. This violence acted as a catalyst forcing blacks to leave the state after the Till murder. It was no coincidence that the same county in which Till's murderers were tried was also, a few months before, the birthing ground for the White Citizen's Council. This group pledged to subvert black progress by thwarting the mandates of the 1954 *Brown* decision to desegregate public schools "with all deliberate speed" and allowing blacks to register and vote. The Southern Jim Crow strategy retarding the political, educational, and economic status of blacks was well established in the state of Mississippi, and most especially in the seventeen delta counties where the majority of the black population lived. This legacy of oppression gave Emmett Till's murderers the license to murder a child for an alleged infraction of the Southern code of behavior. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* case that separate but equal was inherently unequal. Hence, the *Brown* decision overturned the "separate but equal" ruling of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case on which Southern whites hinged their interpretation of legal segregation between blacks and whites. Blacks around the country were elated with this decision, particularly in affected areas such as Mississippi, the most segregated state in the nation. White Southerners, on the other hand, were incensed. This was just another indication that the federal government wanted to change their way of life just as it had tried to do in the Civil War years.

It is not, however, the 1954 *Brown* decision that most black Mississippi migrants remember about this period but, rather, the murder of Emmett Till. Henry Hampton's PBS series, "Eyes on the Prize," begins with a twenty-minute vignette about the Till lynching. The most powerful witness to this event was sixty-four-year-old Moses Wright, Till's grand uncle. Hampton used the scene to prove that the Till murder acted as an introduction and catalyst to a new phase of black activism known as the modern civil rights movement and the beginning of the end of the Jim Crow era. He portrayed Wright as a hero when he stood up from the witness chair in the Sumner, MS, courtroom and pointed his long, wrinkled black finger toward one of the white defendants and said, "Dar he" — There he is. For a black man in Mississippi to stand in a courtroom in 1955 and point his finger at a white man, accusing him of killing a black boy, was revolutionary.<sup>10</sup>

Moses Wright and several other state witnesses were put under protective custody by federal marshals until the trial because of death threats. From a place of safety, the interviewer asked Wright if he would return to Mississippi to testify for the trial. Wright answered, "Yes, suh, if I live, I will. I promised to." The interviewer then asked what his plans were after the trial, to which Wright answered, "I will leave Mississippi after I testify. I don't want nothing else of Mississippi. I'm through with Mississippi for good."<sup>11</sup>

Moses Wright was born in Lexington, MS, in 1890. He came to the Delta in 1927 and moved to Money, MS, in 1946. A tall, lean, graying man, Wright was a minister-farmer of the Church of God in Christ. He lived on the plantation of G.C. Frederick, a German who "believes in giving you what you make." Wright was a lover of the outdoors and "good for 200 pounds of cotton any day."<sup>12</sup> He had turned down pleas by his wife and older children to move from Mississippi for years. After the trial he moved to Argo, IL, where he died, never having returned to Mississippi.

### **Black Mississippi Migrants Remember Till**

Anne Moody wrote in her seminal work, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, that as she took a bus from Jackson, MS, to journey to the March on Washington, she wondered if her work in Mississippi meant anything or if she should just

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Hampton, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years*, PBS documentary, episode I: "Awakening" (1954-1956), January 21, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Moses Wright, "How I Escaped from Mississippi," *Jet*, October 13, 1955, pp. 6-11.



keep going. Eventually, Ms. Moody did leave Mississippi, but her memories of place are poignant reminders of her attachment to a place that was not always safe in which to live, work, and raise a family.<sup>13</sup> Moody was not the only black Mississippian to question whether to stay or leave. Some who left the state believed that one day they would return to make it a better place. Others never wanted to see the place again.

Moody offers perhaps the most poignant recollection about the Till murder. From Wilkinson County, MS, she was fifteen-years-old when Till was murdered. She wrote:

Before Emmett Till's murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears. I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white men who murdered Emmett Till and I hated all the other whites who were responsible for the countless murders. . . . But I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders. In fact, I think I had a stronger resentment toward Negroes for letting the whites kill them than toward the whites.<sup>14</sup>

Although Moody was almost thirty when she penned her autobiography, she still seemed wounded by the betrayal of black people in this case. She mirrors Richard Wright's skepticism and distrust of black Mississippians when he wrote, "I use to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how bare our traditions ... how shallow our despair."<sup>15</sup> The disappointment and despair evident in Moody's and Wright's texts are understandable, yet history would prove them wrong. A generation of black Mississippians stood up and took charge of their lives and became political actors. Michael Middleton, who was eight years of age at the time, is proof of this. He was born in Jackson, Mississippi, and remembers:

I was eight. That's when I learned, that was when it was confirmed to me how important [it was] not to have any contact with white

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, New York: Dial Press, 1968, p. 125.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 129.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, New York: Thunders Mouth Press, 1941, p. 40.

women. How important it was to cross the street when you had been approached. You know your parents will tell you that, but when someone around your age is killed, the costs of something like that. It made it very real. And I haven't ever forgotten that. I know it [has] something to do with who I am today. That was a real practical lesson for all of us then.<sup>16</sup>

A civil rights attorney, now a professor at the University of Missouri Law School and associate provost of the university, Middleton served in the Carter administration. His father, an Episcopal priest, was a chaplain in the armed forces, and so the family moved around the country a great deal. Middleton's childhood memories differ from Anne Moody's and Richard Wright's, and he has dedicated his life to changing the political status of black Americans, especially Mississippians. He continues:

Yeah, you know my fondest memories are anyways as a young child on Rose Street. My grandmother and grandfather lived a block away down the street. I guess that was typical in those days. My parents bought the house when my dad was in World War II. I remember they told me he sent her \$4,000, and she bought the house cash money, a block up from her mother. Her sister lived three more blocks away on Montgomery Street, where her other sister lived. So we could walk to both aunts' houses and to Grandma's house and it was a nice family kind of environment. [I had] a great childhood. It was an all black community. We did not interact with white people at all. We would see them on TV, once we got a TV; otherwise there was no interaction. Lots of negative interactions—um, shopping for example, not being able to try on shoes at a shoe store. Now, I was a military officer's child, which was unique. When I wasn't in Jackson, I was the privileged person; I was the one explaining to my friends why they couldn't come to the officers' club swimming pool because their dads were not officers. In the movement from Fort Lennox, Washington, back to Jackson, I had to turn back into this black kid who couldn't try on shoes in a store. So, I have vivid memories of those kind of things.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Michael Middleton, November 23, 2005, Columbia, Missouri.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

Willie Strickland, who is older than Middleton and Moody, was teaching in Hattiesburg, MS, when Till was murdered. She grew up as an only child in Mississippi, where her father was a mail carrier for the United States Post Office. Her memories were of more practical things that would effect her family:

I was in Hattiesburg in '55 ....Right away, it was a big thing; everybody was talking about it. In the newspapers and magazines and everywhere else we go ... we all talked about it. ... Well, everybody was anxious to see. ... We all started voting and were interested in it. ... There was the poll tax before we left to vote. ... You couldn't even register without the Poll Tax. ... There were strange disappearances at the office where you were supposed to meet with the registrar and all kinds of things. ... I guess that was the situation.<sup>18</sup>

Strickland and her family left Mississippi two years later so her husband could pursue a graduate degree, and although they returned for short periods of time, they never again lived there permanently again.

K.C. Morrison's memory of the Till incident is less clear than those of the other respondents. "We were aware of it, heard of it, but for some reason the lynching that stood out in my mind was Mack Charles Parker a year or two later. I remember that was the one that really hit me. I remember my family talking about it and how awful it was and how terrible that these kind of things could happen without any recourse."<sup>19</sup>Morrison was only seven years old when Till was killed, and the murder of Mack Charles Parker was closer in proximity to his hometown.

When I asked Mrs. Strickland, Mr. Middleton, and Mr. Morrison what came to mind when they heard the word *Mississippi*, they responded as follows. Mrs. Strickland said:

Oh, I think about lots of things and home. Home, that's what I think about. Yeah, I do [consider myself a Mississippian]. I have lived in Missouri and Illinois more years than I lived in Mississippi! (Laughs.) About 36 years and in Illinois before that ... so ... more than seven years in Chicago ... and then four in Champaign. So,

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18 Interview with Willie P. Strickland, November 22, 2005, Columbia, Missouri.

19 Interview with K.C. Morrison, November 23, 2005.

20 Interview with Willie P. Strickland, November 22, 2005, Columbia, Missouri.

ah, I actually only lived in Mississippi for twenty something years.<sup>20</sup>

While Middleton responded:

I also have a real vivid memory. Behind our own backyard, there was a creek. And across the creek, there was a park, and I can remember observing Ku Klux Klan rallies in that park from the bushes in my backyard. And I would see their flag and their crosses. I remember standing in my grandmother's backyard, feeding chickens and other stuff. I remember I was always helping her in her garden—I don't know how I remember—but I used to ask her which were the weeds and which were the flowers. Her answer was the weeds are the ones growing where you don't want them. I thought it was so great; it's the ones growing where you don't want it. I've used that in discussions of race with people. And it's a decision you have to make, which ones do you want and which don't you. It's not that they're different. They're all growing plants. So, I take a lot from my Mississippi upbringing and use it. What I remember most about it was a close family, and close friends. It's where I grew up. It's where I was born. That's where my people are from. And I guess where my people are. So I mean I have lots of Mississippi coming from my father's side with the Episcopal priest thing and the church. I need to know about this because this is who I am. So, that kind of history makes me a Mississippian.<sup>21</sup>

Morrison summed it up:

There is no other place that I can think of as home. I think of nothing else as home, but I haven't lived there for forty years. Yet I never thought of anywhere else. I don't have to have Mississippi that way—I never needed that kind of confirmation. I don't have to be there in long stretches of time. I don't have a picture in my mind of possessing something that doesn't exist anymore. I carry Mississippi with me wherever I go. A certain sensibility about race, a lens through which to view the country—it gives me a certain framework of being black. In this country I am never confused about that.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Michael Middleton, November 22, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with K.C. Morrison, November 23, 2005, Columbia, Missouri.

Although the respondents remembered the Till incident, they did not leave the state until well after the murder, but it did color their memories. All in all, most considered Mississippi their home. Their memories are reminiscent of Ellison's definition of the blues—"an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it."<sup>23</sup> They all remembered Mississippi as Richard Wright described it, as "red and black and brown clay, with fresh hungry smells, with pine trees and palm trees, with rolling hills and swampy delta ... filled with quiet noises and scenes of growth."<sup>24</sup> And they also remembered it as a site of rebirth, where black blood brought black redemption. Most of them were reared in stable, hard-working families with strong religious faith, and a belief that education was an avenue for freedom. In this sense, Wright told our Southern story. A Southern story that differed only in tone and structure because of time and circumstances.

Migration from Mississippi in the 1950s was part of a second wave that would drain the state and leave blacks for the first time in the minority. Emmett Till's murder was not an anomaly. It was not the first or last murder of a black man in Mississippi. Yet it was publicized more than any of the others before or after. Many believe that the reason that we remember the big doe-eyed boy-child was due to his mother, Mamie Till Bradley. She made the memory of her son a crusade. She insisted that there be an open coffin so that the world could see what they did to her boy. If the picture of Till in his Sunday suit, white shirt, hat cocked at an angle, and those large brown eyes is not haunting, then the picture of his battered body is the stuff of nightmares. Till's memory is etched in our collective memory. Mamie Till Bradley knew that the murder of her son would have historic meaning for the majority of black Americans, but it had a revolutionary impact on black Mississippians—as to whether they decided to stay or leave the state. For those who left, it became a historic marker and a part of our common memories along with Wright's description of the landscape, and our memories of family and community. As Claude McKay wrote: "I cannot praise, for you have passed from praise, I have no tinted thoughts to paint you true; But I can feel and I can write the word; The best of me is but the least of you."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Molefe Kete Asante, "Ralph Ellison and Cultural Knowledge," from <http://www.asante.net/articles/ellison.html>

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Claude McKay, "Heritage,"

# Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*)

BY MARK D. MILLER

June 22, 2015, the first full day of summer.

There has been another mass murder in the country, this time at the historic Emanuel AME Church—“Mother Emanuel,” as it is commonly called—in Charleston, SC, on Wednesday night, June 17, 2015. A twenty-one-year-old man joined the people congregated there that night for a Bible study and, after about an hour, pulled out a gun and opened fire, killing nine.

Twenty-one years old, a man; age, gender.

What color was his skin? What was his apparent race?

The people gathered there that night would have noted the answer to those questions, but apparently that answer, that characteristic, was not a determining factor in whether or not this person could join them, any more than age, or gender, or say, height, weight, eye color, hair color, or any other superficially apparent characteristic. For him, though, race was the paramount consideration. In his mind, he was of *the* superior race, they—or most of them—of an inferior race that needed to be eliminated. He opened fire.

If these words of mine were to survive a thousand years, would readers of that distant future know what I was talking about? Would they know, as we today know, without even saying it, the answer to the questions, “What color was his skin? What was his apparent race?”

Two nights after this latest horror took place in Charleston, SC, my girlfriend, a friend of ours, and I joined another acquaintance at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) here in North Adams, MA, for a showing of the newly restored documentary film, *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, written and directed by Karen Thorsen, who attended the showing. This was the opening event of the *Lift Ev'ry Voice Festival* at MASS MoCA, and was part of a nationwide series of community forums, "Conversations with Jimmy," to celebrate Baldwin's life and work on the occasion of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, Aug. 2, 2014. Each forum includes a screening of the digitally restored film, which first aired on PBS on Aug. 14, 1989, less than two years after the author's death in France on Dec. 1, 1987. Baldwin has long been one of my favorite writers. I teach some of his work regularly and consider "Sonny's Blues" to be perhaps the best short story ever written in English—certainly *one* of the best. We were already planning to attend this Juneteenth celebration, but after the Charleston horror, it became even more significant and appropriate.

I suppose I was most struck by a sort of valedictory speech near the end of the film in which Baldwin's brother, David, reports what the author said concerning his hope for his work, his legacy. He used the image of someone "digging through the ruins," and he expressed the hope that, "somewhere in that wreckage"—the phrase is repeated twice, and the word "wreckage" three times—the digger will find something that they can "use," something that he "left behind." That is, ". . . they'll find me." If James Baldwin has done that, he said, then he will have "accomplished something in life." David Baldwin delivers these words with great emotion, and the effect is very powerful. I suppose they express any artist's hope for their work. I know they express mine.

Ironically, much of the "talk-back" session after the film focused on the fact that a number of people in the audience—including a young person seated on the platform, along with Ms. Thorsen, for the talk-back session—had never heard of James Baldwin before. Many of the young people, in particular, who spoke bemoaned this fact, and insisted that his life and work should be taught in the schools. I agree—"I'm doing my best," I joked to my girlfriend—but I also could not help but think of the end of "Sonny's Blues," where Baldwin very eloquently expresses each generation's need to find its *own* voice. Who are the James Baldwins of today? Of course, I am also skeptical, for I suspect that Baldwin's genius is difficult to match. Still, I know there are powerful voices out there to whom young people already pay heed, and if



Baldwin is correct at the end of “Sonny’s Blues”—and I think that he is—then these artists are telling the old, human story, but in a new way, so that a new generation will *listen*. If today’s young people listen to today’s best artists, they might learn, in time, to listen to James Baldwin, too. They might discover him as they dig through the ruins.

Also ironically, I happened to be reading Robert Penn Warren’s 1956 book, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (New York: Random House), part of which appeared in *Life* magazine on July 9, 1956, as “Divided South Searches Its Soul.” Before the spring semester and the school year ended, the colleague who two years ago took my place on the editorial board of our college journal, *The Mind’s Eye*, asked if I had anything I would care to submit on the general topic of social justice. I was already reading Warren’s 1965 volume, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House), with the idea that I might write something on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its publication. As usual, though, the work of teaching and (beginning in 2008) of being department chairperson impeded my scholarly work, and I had gotten nowhere. It then occurred to me that writing something on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Segregation* might be a more realistic goal: shorter book, more time to write something. Besides, *Segregation* was the germ or seed for the longer, later book. In it, Warren travels through the South and speaks with a wide spectrum of people in order to “find out something,” to use the language of the later book (“Foreword,” ix), about how people in the South were reacting to the recent Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*, and about what they thought would happen now. The book also is a self-exploration.

Then, it occurred to me: there is a Warren-Baldwin connection. They were close friends with some of the same people, most notably, perhaps, the writer William Styron and his wife, Rose. Baldwin quoted Warren’s *Segregation* in his essay on William Faulkner, and Warren interviewed Baldwin for *Who Speaks for the Negro?* and wrote a long section on him for that book. Yet these two men—one born in Guthrie, KY, on the border with Tennessee, in 1905, and with two grandfathers who rode with Nathan Bedford Forrest, the other born in 1924, in Harlem, NY, and an important figure in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and beyond—could not be, on the surface, more different from one another. I wondered, where do they find common ground? Upon what do they agree? If they misunderstand one another or disagree with one another, why, and on what grounds? The answers *might* provide

some important insights into the subject of social justice, and even into this most recent horrific injustice.

Warren begins the section on Baldwin in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* by saying, “James Baldwin has often been called a ‘voice’—”

the voice of a generation, the voice of revolution, the voice of an age, the voice of conscience, the voice of the New Negro, the voice of this and the voice of that. He has not been called the one thing he really, specifically, and strictly is: *the voice of himself*. (277)

Later, Warren says, “The voice, as can be discovered by a little exercise in logic, says, or seems to say, very different, even contradictory things” (291). Paradoxically, according to Warren, this is “the source of Baldwin’s power. Whatever is vague, blurred, or self-contradictory in his utterances,” Warren says, “somehow testifies to the magisterial authenticity of the utterance—”

it is the dramatic image of a man struggling to make sense of the relation of personal tensions to the tensions of the race issue. In his various shiftings of ground in treating the race issue he merely dramatizes the fact that the race issue does permeate all things, all levels; and in the constantly presented drama of the interpenetration of his personal story with the race issue he gives the issue a frightening—and fascinating—immediacy. It is *his* story we finally listen to, in all its complexity of precise and shocking image, and shadowy allusiveness. (296)

We think of David Baldwin recounting his brother James’s expressed hope that “someone digging through the ruins” and “wreckage” will “find me.”

In elaborating on how this “personal drama,” or drama of “*me*—the drama of James Baldwin”—melds with “the public drama” so that the “‘interior life’ of James Baldwin and the exterior fate of the country are, for dramatic purposes, merged, identified” (281), Warren adopts a tone that is sarcastic and perhaps even a bit contemptuous, but in this, he is himself being inconsistent and contradictory. He argues that, according to Baldwin, the public drama and its resolution “must be of apocalyptic intensity” (281), along the lines of that moment described by Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* when, as a young teenager, he was “saved.” “On that Great Day when ‘ultimately race would count for nothing,’” says Warren, quoting Baldwin from his interview with him, “we shall be made whole, and there will be a kind of cosmically exfoliat-

ing pun on the word *integration*: racial integration and personal integration at the same apocalyptic moment” (282). In *Segregation*, Warren argues that personal integration is precisely what is needed to resolve *The Inner Conflict in the South*, even going so far as to say that “. . . a division between man and man is not as important in the long run as the division within the individual man” (53). After cataloguing many examples of such “self-division,” Warren says, “There are almost an infinite number of permutations and combinations, but they all amount to the same thing, a deep intellectual rub, a moral rub, anger at the irremediable self-division, a deep exacerbation at some failure to find identity. That is the reality” (54). Warren and Baldwin *seem* to be saying the same thing, then: personal integration, or the achievement of identity, is necessary for the achievement of social integration. Why, then, the sarcasm on Warren’s part? Where do they disagree, if they do?

The word “apocalyptic,” which Warren repeats twice, points to the crux of their disagreement, which may, in fact, arise from a misinterpretation or a misrepresentation, on Warren’s part, of Baldwin’s position. “Apocalyptic” suggests a total and instantaneous solution or resolution, and it is to that Warren seems most strenuously to object, though he also scorns the grandiose notion that this apocalyptic solution will be “precipitated, as it were, by the catalytic introduction of James Baldwin.” Is this really what Baldwin thinks and says, though? Warren quotes as evidence this statement from his interview with Baldwin: “In order to accommodate *me*, in order to overcome so many centuries of cruelty and bad faith and genocide and fear—simple fear—all the American institutions and all the American values, public and private, will have to change” (281). The word “all” here does suggest totality, but Baldwin does not say all *at once*. Is that what he means?

This is the question of “gradualism” that was so hotly debated during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Warren makes his own position on the matter quite clear in the interview with himself that he conducts at the end of *Segregation*:

Q. Are you a gradualist on the matter of segregation?

A. If by gradualist you mean a person who would create delay for the sake of delay, then no. If by gradualist you mean a person who thinks it will take time, not time as such, but time for an educational process, preferably a calculated one, then yes. I mean a process of mutual education for whites and blacks. And part of this education

should be in the actual beginning of the process of desegregation. It's a silly question, anyway, to ask if somebody is a gradualist. Gradualism is all you'll get. History, like nature, knows no jumps. Except the jump backward, maybe. (65)

Warren does not stray from this position in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*

Baldwin, on the other hand, he takes to be a revolutionary—a person with missionary zeal—and not a “gradualist.” In describing in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* the “apocalyptic intensity” he attributes to Baldwin’s resolution of the “merged” personal and public dramas of the segregated self, Warren says:

We are not to think of a Civil Rights Bill, of FEPC [Fair Employment Practice Committee], of housing, of social adaptations, of economic adjustments, of legal process, of education, of the slow growth, painful and wavering, of understanding and a sense of justice. We are to think of the blaze of light that rends the roof and knocks us all—all America and all American institutions—flat on the floor while the “vertical saints” [a phrase from *The Fire Next Time*] sing and rejoice and the whole continent rocks like Pentecost. (281)

This is very *snarky*, to use today’s lingo for the attitude and tone expressed here. It is also, in at least one sense, wrong.

It is true that, in his interview with Warren, Baldwin says that the revolution and resolution he has in mind as a “fuzzy” hope would require “a great—a radical—shift in the American way of life” and that there is “very little time” (280). However, in a part of the interview that Warren chooses *not* to quote, Baldwin says, “. . . you can’t say—you may determine in your own mind, but you can’t say, you know, we’re going to have integration on my terms or not at all, because if you’re going to be realistic about it—and you have to be—you have to try—one has got to realize that it will take some time. The trick is to get it started, you know” ([whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/james-baldwin](http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/james-baldwin), Transcript, Tape #2, p. 10). This comment comes in the context of a discussion about how, practically, to integrate the schools, and Baldwin, arguing that the first step is to integrate the neighborhoods, says, “. . . it seems to me that sooner or later we’re going to have to carry the battle straight into the real estate boards and banks. That’s where the trouble is” (Tape #2, p. 9). This does not sound like religious zeal or revolutionary fervor, and it certainly does not sound “apocalyptic.” It sounds pragmatic. It sounds like Warren himself. One wonders—I wonder—why Warren chose not to hear it.

I will address that question later on, but first, I want to propose another interpretation of Baldwin's position, different from the one Warren gives in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* At first glance, Baldwin does seem to be saying "very different, even contradictory things" when he says, on the one hand, that there is "very little time" for change, but then, on the other hand, that change "will take some time." However, there is an important sense in which *both* of these things are true. Warren says that when Baldwin merges his "personal drama" of integration with the "public drama" of integration, he gives the latter "a frightening—and fascinating—immediacy." I would argue that this is because, on the personal level—for each individual—the personal drama *always* has a frightening immediacy of "apocalyptic intensity": if we do not integrate ourselves in time and so form an identity by healing our many self-divisions, then we may come to the end of life and discover, to our horror, that—as Henry David Thoreau puts it in *Walden*—we have not really lived. Moreover, if we think that society, or some aspect of society, is *thwarting* our effort to be whole and, therefore, to live, we are very likely to want to change society or that aspect of society, perhaps radically, and perhaps even by violent means, trying to resolve the personal drama by resolving the public drama absolutely and apocalyptically. I will just pause to say that this is a pervasive theme in Warren's own work, where we see character after character caught in this dilemma. It is a real dilemma, though, and it is *really* frightening.

According to what I have gathered from the news about his "manifestoes," that young man who murdered nine innocent people at Mother Emanuel church in Charleston, SC, had gotten it in his head that they and everyone like them were a threat to his identity, to his very being. Granted, his fear was paranoia—pathological fear—but to degrees that usually do not reach such pathological levels, such fear lies at the heart of much discrimination and oppression.

And what, in turn, is the source of that fear? In the self-interview at the end of *Segregation*, Warren tells a story to indicate that one source of fear in an oppressor may be guilt:

. . . I knew an old lady who grew up in a black county, but a county where relations had been, as they say, good. She had a fine farm and a good brick house, and when she got old she sort of retired from the world. The hottest summer weather and she would lock all the doors and windows at night, and lie there in the airless dark. But

sometimes she'd telephone that somebody was burning the Negroes out there on her place. She could hear their screams. Something was going on in her old head which in another place and time would not have been going on in her old head. She had never, I should think, seen an act of violence in her life. But something was going on in her head.

Warren offers this example of fearful self-division after having said, "I don't think the problem is to learn to live with the Negro. . . . It is to learn to live with ourselves. . . . I don't think you can live with yourself when you are humiliating the man next to you" (63-64).

Guilt is not what caused the Charleston murderer to feel that his identity was being threatened; however, and certainly was not the feeling that motivated him to act, unless deep-seated guilt was somehow transmuted into virulent and violent hatred. Where, then, did his fear come from? If Baldwin were to answer that question, he would say that it came from immaturity and ignorance. As part of his response in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* to the question of "the change that would have to come over American life" for true integration to occur, Baldwin says, "Americans simply—not so simply—would grow up enough to recognize that I don't frighten them" (282). In a part of the interview that Warren chooses not to quote in the book, Baldwin goes on to say, "A lot of the problem here is not—has nothing to do with the race at all. It has to do with ignorance and it has to do with the cult of youth" (Tape #1, p. 5). Ignorance can be a lack of education due to a lack of opportunity or a lack of experience, both of which *may be* corollaries of youth. However, the phrase "the cult of youth" suggests willful ignorance due to the arrogant assumption that old people and history have nothing to teach the young, because the society they have brought about is such an obvious mess and failure. "Don't trust anyone over 30," said Jack Weinberg and the Free Speech Movement at UC-Berkeley during 1964 and 1965, a slogan and sentiment that gained wide currency in the 1960s and beyond. Yet such ignorance is actually ageless, and it tends to go hand-in-hand with fear. Each reinforces the other. We fear what—or whom—we do not know, but we can never really come to know those whom we not only segregate from our lives, but oppress and perhaps even attempt to expunge because we fear them.

That young killer's fear and ignorance did not come from a *lack* of education, however—or at least not solely. Rather, these things were *taught* to him,

along with hate. We are not born with prejudice, fear, and hate; we learn these things. They are taught to us. Twenty-one years is not a long time, but it is obviously plenty of time to learn prejudice, fear, and hate. This is one reason there is “very little time,” as Baldwin says. In this sense, there was very little time when he made that comment, and there is very little time now. In fact, there is *never* much time. We begin learning from the time we are born. Certain kinds of learning even take place *in utero*. What lessons are we learning? From whom? If they are the sort of lessons that eventuate in prejudice, fear, and hate, is it possible to undo them before they also eventuate in murder? Is there time?

Baldwin also is very eloquent and clear about the fear instilled in the oppressed by their oppressors, a fear that gives rise to desperate despair and to people who feel they have nothing to lose—“the most dangerous creation of any society,” according to Baldwin (*The Fire Next Time* [New York: The Dial Press, 1963], 90). This is the appalling sense of there being “no safety” that Baldwin articulates and dramatizes so well in “Sonny’s Blues” and that appears in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* in a section Warren quotes from the May 1963 *Mademoiselle* magazine interview with Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch Handy, “Disturbers of the Peace” (278). In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin describes how this fear “filters into the child’s consciousness through his parents’ tone of voice as he is being exhorted, punished, or loved; in the sudden, uncontrollable note of fear heard in his mother’s or his father’s voice when he has strayed beyond some particular boundary. He does not know what the boundary is, and he can get no explanation of it, which is frightening enough, but the fear he hears in the voices of the elders is more frightening still” (40). Baldwin says that he attempted to defend himself against the fear his father made him feel “by remembering that he was very old-fashioned”—again, the arrogant ignorance of the young. However, this defense failed, and the summer Baldwin turned fourteen, he says, “. . . all the fears with which I had grown up and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into the church” (41). Ultimately, though, the church could offer no safety either, and was in fact dangerous in its own way.

Tomorrow, at an orientation session at my college, I must address some 21 students set to begin school here in the fall as majors in English. I am supposed to orient them to the major and, to some degree, to the academic side of the college experience. I have forty-five minutes to do this. That is not a lot of



time. I never know what I am going to say or do at these events until the last minute, but I was thinking that I might focus less on the what, when, where, and how of things, and more on the who, and especially the why. I thought that I might use some of the things I have been thinking about for this essay. Perhaps I could pose a question: why has the outrage at the murders in Charleston become focused on the Confederate flag flying next to the memorial for the Confederate dead on the statehouse grounds in South Carolina? Why are we not able to separate the warriors from the war in this instance—or at least their banner—as we have belatedly begun to do even for veterans of the war in Vietnam? Forty-five minutes may not be enough time, though, particularly since we do have a few practical matters to address as well. Indeed, *four years* may not be enough time, and may be too late. Each year, though, they come, these young people, many of whom, as during that Juneteenth celebration, have never heard of Robert Penn Warren, James Baldwin, Juneteenth, or a host of other important people, places, and events. They are forever young, and yet not forever young, and their time is *now*. I think that this is one thing Baldwin means when he says that there is “very little time.”

Indeed, there is a sense in which the time is always *now* for each and every one of us. Since things change over time and there is a constant influx of what William James calls “novelties” into the world, including new people; we are all forever young and innocent in the sense that we constantly have to adapt to change and to learn new things. In his essay on William Faulkner, “Faulkner and Desegregation” (in *Nobody Knows My Name* [New York: Dell, 1963], 100-106), Baldwin says that the hope “that the white Southerner, with no coercion from the rest of the nation, will lift himself above his ancient crippling bitterness and refuse to add to his already intolerable burden of blood-guiltiness” seems to be “absolutely dependent on a social and psychological stasis which simply does not exist” (105-106). Change forces the moment to its crisis moment by moment, over and over and over again. As Baldwin says at the conclusion of his essay on Faulkner, “There is never a time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now.” That is why “the time Faulkner asks for” when he says to “go slow” on segregation “does not exist,” according to Baldwin (106, 100).

In *Segregation*, when Warren describes those “idealists” in the South who yearn “*To be Southern again*: to recreate a habitation for the values they would preserve, to achieve in unity some clarity of spirit, to envisage some healed image of their own identity,” he says that they are caught in a paradox: in

seeking to preserve individualism by taking refuge in the vision of a South redeemed in unity and antique virtue, they are fleeing from the burden of their own individuality—the intellectual rub, the moral rub. To state the matter another way, by using the argument of *mere* social continuity and the justification by mere *mores*, they think of a world in which circumstances and values are frozen; but the essence of individuality is the willingness to accept the rub which the flux of things provokes, to accept one's fate in time. (55)

Baldwin's insistence in his essay on Faulkner that "the challenge is in the moment, the time is always now," because life is not "stasis," but change, so closely resembles Warren's contention here, in *Segregation*, that, because life is not "frozen," the "flux of things" constantly forces each of us to accept our "fate in time," that one wonders if Baldwin had Warren's statement in mind when he wrote his own. Certainly he had read *Segregation* in preparation for writing his essay on Faulkner, for he quotes from it.

And if Baldwin did not have in mind that passage from *Segregation* when he wrote his own words on the same subject in the Faulkner essay, perhaps he had this one in mind:

We have to deal with the problem our historical moment proposes, the burden of our time. We all live with a thousand unsolved problems of justice all the time. We don't even recognize a lot of them. We have to deal only with those which the moment proposes to us. Anyway, we can't legislate for posterity. All we can do for posterity is to try to plug along in a way to make them think we—the old folks—did the best we could for justice, as we could understand it. (65)

Of course, Baldwin repeatedly insists that Americans need "to grow up enough" not to be afraid of true integration, and in the letter to his nephew at the beginning of *The Fire Next Time*, he even refers to "those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe," as "your lost, younger brothers" who need to be forced "to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (88, 23-24). Surely, one sign of maturity, of being grown up, is the recognition that the past is past, and that the dogmas of the now quiet past may be inadequate to the stormy present. As Baldwin says in *The Fire Next Time*, "To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it" (95). Here again, James Baldwin sounds a heck of a lot like Robert Penn Warren.

Since Warren and Baldwin seem to agree on so many points and so often seem to be saying precisely the same thing, why was Warren not more sympathetic towards the younger writer, and why did he not read or represent him more accurately? I can only speculate, but I will hazard some guesses, based upon my knowledge of Warren and of his work and upon some of the things he says in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* I am tempted to say that they were just men of different temperaments, to use William James's word, and leave it at that, but in fact, they even seem to have a certain temperamental affinity. That is, as we have seen, they often seem to share the same *feel* of the whole push of the cosmos, as James would say. I know that it is my sense of this temperamental affinity between them that attracts me to the work of both men.

I suppose the most revealing remark by Warren concerning the question of his negative attitude towards Baldwin is when he says that, in his "utterances, written or spoken," Baldwin "instinctively makes this shift of the center of gravity of a discussion, toward an undercut, toward the more general and more charged, toward the absolute" (295). Warren always had what he once called a "pathological flinch" from the absolute (*Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, ed. Floyd C. Watkins, et al. [Athens, GA: U Georgia P, 1990], 155), even as he was always strangely attracted to it. Actually, to be more accurate, he was always attracted to stories of persons seduced by the allure of the absolute, and he admired those who fought successfully against it. Herman Melville comes to mind. This is because Warren himself felt so strongly the allure of the absolute and fought against it. He seems to regard Baldwin as someone who gave in to that allure too frequently and, as a result, made reckless, inflammatory statements. For instance, in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Warren cites a round-table discussion in which Warren's old friend, Sidney Hook, "said that the case against discrimination rests on ethical premises."

Baldwin retorted that there is no use talking "about ethical considerations in a society which is essentially *not* ethical"; and here the swing is toward the absolute, the eschatological—which is not relevant, for in this same sense, no society has ever been "ethical."

Warren goes on to say that this is an instance of how Baldwin "sometimes is trapped by his own rhetoric, becomes the victim of the Gift of Tongues which he has smuggled out of the House of Spirit onto the hustings" (295). Absolutism for rhetorical effect is still absolutism, though, and it is irresponsible, according to Warren.

For always, but especially if one is a “voice” that *Speaks* for large groups of people, words are a kind of action, and those words, like actions, can have far-reaching consequences, including actual, physical actions in the actual world. Here is Warren’s most excoriating remark along these lines in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*:

When Baldwin says that no matter what the white worker for CORE or Snick does (go to jail, be beaten, be crushed under a bulldozer, be shot and flung into a bayou or buried under a dam), his “work has no resonance,” we are tempted to wonder just what that word *resonance* is supposed to mean. (295)

According to Warren, such unfeeling, dehumanizing speech is the result of what he finally, frankly calls “the absolutism of James Baldwin” (308), and the clear implication is that such absolutistic language can incite unfeeling, dehumanizing actions as well. Certainly it seems very much at odds with that other, “healing word” that, as Warren points out, “. . . we hear over and over again” from Baldwin: “love” (298).

Another American writer who tended towards absolutism once said, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Baldwin often seems to want to goad and even irritate the reader or listener, and when Warren sounds out many of the people he interviews on the subject of James Baldwin and things that he has said or written, they generally acknowledge his effectiveness, even if grudgingly, and even as they disagree with him and say that he does not speak for them. That he managed to goad and even irritate Warren, much as Emerson did, is perhaps evident in the index of *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Among the people listed there, only Martin Luther King, Jr. has more page number references than James Baldwin. The section on Baldwin in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* appears in Chapter Four, which is entitled “Leadership from the Periphery.” Presumably, Warren puts Baldwin on the periphery in part because of what he perceives to be his absolutism, his extremism.

The organization of that chapter is another indication of Warren’s attitude. Just before the section on Baldwin in Chapter Four appears a section on Federal Judge William Henry Hastie, and a few paragraphs before Warren asks Judge Hastie to comment on a remark by James Baldwin, he asks him about Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, which elicits this comment from Judge Hastie:

There are certain stages [in history] when persons like that represent

the spark to a movement and we can recognize their value as that, without having a necessary admiration for the intemperate, even violent, personality, yet we recognize that throughout history, those personalities have been catalysts of great changes, some good, some bad. (274)

This reminds me of a similar statement about Abolitionist John Brown by President Barack Obama in his book, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Crown/Three Rivers Press, 2006). A few pages after Judge Hastie's remark about Garrison, Warren describes James Baldwin as such a would-be catalyst for "the Great Redemption": the "apocalyptic moment" of total integration (282).

Is Baldwin the absolutist Warren takes him to be? At one point, Warren says that in "the swing . . . toward the absolute . . . Baldwin sometimes is trapped by his own rhetoric" (295). This would seem to suggest that when Baldwin "preaches . . . the awful choice," as Warren puts it—"the Fire Next Time or the Great Redemption" (282)—there may be something inauthentic in his words. Yet as we have seen, Warren also says that "Whatever is vague, blurred, or self-contradictory in his utterances somehow testifies to the magisterial authenticity of the utterance . . ." (296). At the level of rhetoric, self-contradiction would seem to be a foolish *inconsistency* since it would tend to undermine the speaker's authority. For Warren, though, it seems to increase it, apparently because it undercuts the undercut; it defuses the absolutism. It turns James Baldwin the demagogue into Jimmy Baldwin, the flesh and blood human being who struggles with the same self-divisions and yearns for the same unity and certitude of self—or integration—as Robert Penn Warren and all of us.

But is this the *real* Jimmy Baldwin? Warren seems to think so—and I certainly do—but this may be part of why Warren is so "snarky" and unsympathetic towards Baldwin at times. If Baldwin actually feels that it is his responsibility "to take upon himself the necessity of trying to be an example" to the young, as he says—"what the sociologists call a 'role model,'" according to Warren (289-290)—should he not *avoid* absolutist language and positions if he is not *really* an absolutist? Should he not try to avoid setting the *wrong* example?

This whole discussion of "the real Baldwin" takes an interesting turn when, near the end of the section devoted to him in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Warren discusses Baldwin's essay on William Faulkner. Warren contends that ". . . the real Baldwin and the real Faulkner are, in one way, very much alike:"

both are concerned with “truth” as lived, are concerned with the density of experience and the inevitable paradoxicality of feeling, with the shifting depth of being. Both are willing to recognize the tearing self-division that may be implicit in experience, to recognize that the logic of experience is multiphase and contradictory; and are yet willing to submit themselves, without reservation, to this risk of experience. (296-297)

As with so many of his remarks about writers with whom he feels an affinity, this remark applies to Robert Penn Warren, too.

But if “the real Baldwin and the real Faulkner”—and the real Warren, too—are so much alike in this regard, how is it that Baldwin is an absolutist, while Faulkner and, presumably, Warren, are not? Warren says that the James Baldwin who wrote the essay “Faulkner and Desegregation” is “Baldwin the abstract polemicist, and not the Baldwin who wrote *The Fire Next Time*” (296). This is confusing, in part because Warren repeatedly quotes from *The Fire Next Time* to reveal Baldwin the abstract polemicist and Baldwin the apocalyptic absolutist.

However, things get even more confusing. Warren also contends that, in his essay on Faulkner, Baldwin “is dealing with the ‘Squire [of Oxford, MS]’ and not with the man who wrote *The Sound and the Fury* or *Light in August* or *Absalom, Absalom!*” That is, he is not dealing with the real Faulkner. “And this is why,” Warren says, “when [Faulkner] did give an opinion or express a personal view, we may feel let down and defrauded; what the ‘Squire’ says is sometimes thin, or contradictory” (296-297). One such thing that Faulkner said that Baldwin quotes in his essay about Faulkner is “that, if it came to a contest between the federal government and Mississippi, he would fight for Mississippi, ‘even if it meant going out into the streets and shooting Negroes. . . .’” Is this not every bit as extremist, absolutist, irresponsible, and, yes, even racist as some of the things Baldwin says? Baldwin takes him to mean it, too, insisting that “Faulkner means everything he says, means them all at once, and with very nearly the same intensity. He has perhaps never before more concretely expressed what it means to be a Southerner” (*Nobody Knows My Name* 103). Similarly, according to Warren, it is their “vague, blurred, or self-contradictory” nature that “somehow” gives James Baldwin’s “utterances” their “magisterial authenticity,” his “various shiftings of ground in treating the race issue” that “gives the issue a frightening—and fascinating—immediacy,” and

the “complexity of precise and shocking image, and shadowy allusiveness,” that makes his the “story we finally listen to” (296). Why, then, is Warren so “snarky” towards him, and perhaps even a bit contemptuous? What is the difference?

In *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren seems to indicate that the difference is one of literary style. “The drama in which Faulkner sought his knowledge,” Warren says, “emerged in forms that constitute an enormously complicated intellectual as well as imaginative structure, an objective structure. We think of Benjy and Jason and Caddie, and Christmas, and Sutpen, but we do not think of Faulkner; Faulkner remains taciturn, enigmatic, sealed, his reality absorbed into the objective thing created.” That is, we think about the created object, and not its creator. “The drama in which Baldwin seeks his knowledge is, on the contrary, subjective,” according to Warren. “When we mention the name of Baldwin, there is no parade of characters speaking and gesticulating as they swing across the mind, the fictions created. What appears is the face of James Baldwin, a fiction, too, for what Baldwin has most powerfully created is a self. That is a rare and difficult work of art,” Warren finally concedes. Yet he also seems to be suggesting that the art is not just *different* for being subjective, but *lesser*, inferior.

A lot of things are going on here, but I would say first that when I personally think of James Baldwin, I think of “Sonny’s Blues,” a consummate work of fiction, and not of the essays and other non-fiction. Aside from that, though, I think these comments reflect a war that Warren was having with himself in the mid-’60s in his own life as an artist. After almost a decade that he would thereafter refer to as “the drought,” the period from the publication of his first *Selected Poems* in 1944 to 1953 and the birth of his first child, his daughter Rosanna, Warren was unable to complete a single short poem. This was a sort of death to him, for the poems were always more personal to him, as he repeatedly said, and so when they died, it was as if Warren himself had died. With his divorce and remarriage in 1952 and the birth of Rosanna in 1953, the poems came to him again. In 1957, he published *Promises: Poems 1954-1956*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, Warren’s second, but his first for poetry. In the mid-’60s, he was still grappling with this new, more personal style, still feeling his way into it.

However, by May of 1975, in an interview he conducted with his old friend and collaborator, Cleanth Brooks, for a volume edited by Lewis P. Simpson entitled *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work* (Ba-



ton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1976), Warren had evolved in his thinking and his own work to the point where he is able to pose to his old friend the following questions about “the individual artist”: “Must his work not grow out of some deep personal commitment? Won’t it inevitably show a personal focus?” Even in Shakespeare, with all his panoply of plots, characters, and settings, “. . . we find a powerful personality and a certain world view,” Warren says (98). By the mid- to late-’70s, his own poetic style was more personal than ever, including one of the most personal of his many artistic grapplings throughout his career with the issue of race, the poem “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home from Party in the Back Country.” Even in that poem, though, Warren is not *quite* as frankly confessional as the Beat writers, for instance, or the writers who actually would be pinned with that label, the Confessional Poets, and he never would be. Baldwin sometimes was, though.

In fact, when Baldwin says, “In order to accommodate *me* . . . all the American institutions and all the American values, public and private, will have to change,” he is saying essentially the same thing as Allen Ginsberg in his poem “America.” When Ginsberg says, in that poem’s marvelous concluding line, “America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel” (originally published in *Howl and Other Poems* [San Francisco: City Lights Press, 1956]), he is co-opting the narrowly-defined, pejorative word “queer” as it was used in 1956 for use in the broader, politicized sense that we are familiar with today. In fact, he is also using it in its even broader vernacular sense, as when Robert Frost’s speaker in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” says, “My little horse must think it queer”—must think it strange or unusual—“To stop without a farmhouse near.” In the America of Ginsberg’s poem, the America of Jan. 17, 1956, he is “queer” not just in the politicized and sexual sense that we know today, but also in terms of heritage or ethnicity (Jewish), politics (left-leaning, if not Socialist or Communist), religion (again, Judaism, but also Buddhism and other religious and mystical traditions), vocation (he is a writer), and even mental health. According to the status quo, the dominant system of values in America at that time, Ginsberg is “queer” in all of these senses, and perhaps more. Will America allow him to put his “queer shoulder to the wheel” and not be frightened by and attempt to prevent him? He is not going to change. Will America? Baldwin poses a similar challenge to America, during roughly the same years as Ginsberg.

In this light, Warren’s consideration of sexuality as it bears on the question of race is interesting but also, again, off the mark. After quoting Baldwin’s statement in the essay “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” in *Nobody*

*Knows My Name* (171-190, this quotation 174), that “The sexual battleground, if I may call it that, is really the same for everyone . . .,” Warren adduces a series of studies, current in the mid-’60s, that “would seem to indicate a considerable rate of sexual disorder among the Negro population of the United States” (292). “What all the studies show,” Warren concludes, “is that Negroes, given the same psychic strains, react exactly as white people do” (294), which is another way of saying what Baldwin said: “The sexual battleground . . . is really the same for everyone. . . .” “Why,” then, Warren asks, “do whites cling to the ‘myth’ of Negro sexuality? And why are Negroes ambivalent toward it?” (294). Earlier, Warren has said that, “On the matter of sex . . . some of Baldwin’s pronouncements are difficult to reconcile with one another. All his comments on the defect of white sexuality,” for instance, “. . . clearly carry the implication of some happy norm of Negro success in this department” (291-292). Given the facts as revealed in the various studies cited by Warren, and especially given Baldwin’s statement that “The sexual battleground . . . is really the same for everyone,” the general questions Warren asks are also being applied specifically to Baldwin: why does *Baldwin* “cling to the ‘myth’ of Negro sexuality,” and why is *Baldwin* “ambivalent toward it”?

Before he asks these questions, however, Warren makes a statement that has a great bearing on the answers that he gives, particularly, it seems to me, where Baldwin is concerned, though again, the questions and answers, as applied to Baldwin, remain implicit. After referring to studies “of white American boys whose fathers were away in the service in World War II, and of Norwegian boys whose fathers are away at sea for long periods of time,” in terms of the sexuality of these boys, Warren says, “Even without the race pressure you get the same product.” He then goes on to say,

But the mere fact of the race pressure is providing the frame within which develops what one Negro psychologist has told me is a “male revolution.” Here the Negro male can assert himself, can undo the past, as it were, both the social and the personal past. But it seems that almost all Negro leaders come from stable backgrounds in which their powers of personal assertion and their certainty of self had been able to develop normally. (294)

The key word here is “normally.” But, “normally” by whose standards, by what definition? The various studies cited by Warren indicate that one “norm” being applied is the heterosexual one, which was still the dominant “norm” in

1965. However, Baldwin did not come from a “stable” background, even when his father was alive, and his “powers of personal assertion and . . . certainty of self” were not able to develop “normally” by the standards Warren seems to have in mind. Like Ginsberg’s, they developed “queerly.”

And like Ginsberg’s, Baldwin’s sexuality and his identity were multivalent. At one point in the lengthy segment of the Auchincloss and Handy interview with Baldwin that Warren quotes in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Baldwin is talking about his embattled relationship with his father when one of the interviewers says, “*But out of that an identity emerged.*” Baldwin replies, “Yes, all those strangers called Jimmy Baldwin.” One of the interviewers asks, “*Who are some of them?*” After Baldwin offers an initial response of several sentences, the following exchange takes place:

*Who else?*

Lots of people[.] Some of them are unmentionable. There’s a man. There’s a woman, too. There are lots of people here.

*It’s been said that you have two obsessions: color and homosexuality.*

I’m not absolutely sure that I have two obsessions. They’re more than that. (279)

In other words, “queer” would only apply to Baldwin, as to Ginsberg, in its broadest sense, and in 1965, let alone 1956, the language was quite inadequate to describing such a self. In fact, it still falls short.

I want to address further this matter of the inadequacy of language, but before I do, I just want to warn against any sanctimonious judgment of Robert Penn Warren. *Who Speaks for the Negro?* was published 50 years ago—a half a century. Have we yet come to agreement about social “norms” in the realm of human sexuality, or much of anything else, for that matter? Does each of us always regard people from the widest possible perspective? Warren may not have understood or sympathized with every aspect of Baldwin’s struggle for both personal and social integration, but he willingly accepted, as he says both Faulkner and Baldwin also accepted, “the pathos of the drama” (297), and that is a good beginning; for pathos, or empathy, is certainly a necessary first step toward even wider acceptance and greater empathy. In this light, we ourselves, both as individuals and as a society, still have a long way to go, despite the progress of the last 50 years.

At one point in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Warren says that when he

asked Baldwin about “the obligations of the Negro, he countered by saying he wasn’t sure what a Negro is. What is a Negro?” Warren was giving this response by Baldwin as an example of what he describes as Baldwin’s “tendency to pull away from the specific issue which might provoke analysis, toward one more general in which, in a shadowy depth, the emotion coils.” However, of Baldwin’s counter-question, “What is a Negro?” Warren goes on to say, “That is, indeed, a more charged and fascinating question than the one I had asked; and a legitimate response to my generalized cartoon use of the word” (295). These remarks raise several issues. First, we no longer, for the most part, use the word “Negro” anymore, but is there a way to use that word, or either of the words we tend to use today, “black” and “white,” or even the words “African American,” that is *not* a “cartoon use”? We may flinch to hear Robert Penn Warren make pronouncements about “the Negro” or James Baldwin make pronouncements about “the white man,” but is the language we use today any more effective in reflecting a reality—the reality of race in America—that is anything *but* black or white? Language seems to fail us before the discussion has even begun. Up to this point, I have tried myself not to use in this essay the words “black” or “white.” The people I have quoted have used the words, but I have not. It is very, very difficult.

Baldwin himself analyzed this defect in language many times during his career, but he also analyzed many times the defects in thinking and feeling that underlie it. Up to and including the day of the Charleston murders last week, the news was full of stories about Rachel Dolezal, the woman who resigned from her position as head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Spokane, WA, because her estranged mother said she was white and was being “dishonest and deceptive” in claiming to be partly black. This is a complex story with many twists and turns, but as a reversal of the centuries-old practice of “passing,” it certainly touched a very sensitive nerve in many people. It also forced consideration of the degree to which all the attributes we use to try to identify others, and all the words we use to label those attributes and their possessors, may be fictions—or “social constructs,” as they are commonly called—all save one: *human*. That is, this episode forced a broad consideration of Baldwin’s question to Warren: “What is a Negro?”

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin says, “. . . the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world’s definitions” (83). Whose power is threatened when a white woman refuses to accept

any definition except the one she chooses for herself? Bruce Jenner recently chose to become Caitlyn Jenner. Whose power does that threaten? Perhaps what we are witnessing is not a racial revolution or a gender revolution or a sexual revolution, but a *human* revolution: an assertion of the principle that no human being has the right, and none should have the power, to impose an identity on any other human being. I think that this is a principle James Baldwin argued all his life. So did Robert Penn Warren. However, each of them was, as we all are, only human, to use one of Warren's most oft-repeated statements, and in the pathos of *that* drama—the drama of being human—neither of them was absolutely consistent in the articulation or application of that principle. Who among us is? But each of them made the *effort*, and I sense that this is what each of them most deeply appreciated in the other.

To be honest, I have to confess that I wish James Baldwin had been *more* consistent than he was—or at least less black or white, less absolutistic in some of his statements—because I tend to agree with Warren that his inconsistency and absolutism was, at best, foolish, and at worst, reckless. Let me give an example. Here is a passage from *The Fire Next Time* that articulates one of the themes so powerfully embodied and dramatized in the short story “Sonny’s Blues”:

Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we came and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us. (105-106)

In “Sonny’s Blues,” the unnamed narrator distances himself from his younger brother, Sonny, because he fears that Sonny’s trouble endangers the safety he thinks that he has secured for himself and his family. However, when his three-year-old daughter, appropriately named Grace, dies of polio, he suddenly realizes that there *is* no safety, and he reaches out to Sonny. Thus, ac-

knowledge of the fact of death and of its corollary—no safety—has a redemptive consequence for both men.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin articulates this redemptive power of accepting the fact of death as follows:

It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so—and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths—change in the sense of renewal. But renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not—safety, for example, or money, or power. (106)

Indeed, as “Sonny’s Blues” so powerfully demonstrates, keeping life and love at bay out of fear of risk is itself dangerous, and mortally so, for it results in a kind of figurative death to the person thus defended, and may result in quite literal death for those kept at bay, including those kept at bay through oppression.

The ideas articulated by Baldwin here are things to which I can readily and heartily assent, and I suspect Robert Penn Warren could assent to them, too. However, they are not the whole of what Baldwin actually says in *The Fire Next Time*. Between the two passages quoted above, as part of the statement as a whole, appear these two sentences:

But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them. And this is why the presence of the Negro in this country can bring about its destruction. (106)

This is frustrating to me. Why does Baldwin have to be so black or white here, so uncompromising, so absolute? Does he really mean *all* white Americans? If not, would it be too much trouble to insert some sort of qualifying phrase?—to say, for instance, “But too many white Americans do not believe in death . . .”? Moreover, does he also mean *whites only*? In “Sonny’s Blues,” the unnamed narrator who pushes away his brother, Sonny, because he fears that Sonny’s trouble threatens his own safety, is himself, like Sonny and like the creator of both of these characters, African American. Perhaps this is what led Robert Penn Warren to say that fiction is the better style choice for expressing “‘truth’ as lived . . . the density of experience and the inevitable paradoxicality of feeling.” Perhaps. In truth, though, the care Warren took to avoid absolutistic language in his own discursive prose illustrates that such

things are not, finally, a matter of the chosen genre or medium. It also expresses, in part, why Warren would gravitate toward someone such as his longtime friend Ralph Ellison, rather than James Baldwin. It is a matter of individual human temperament.

Baldwin's impulse in the whole statement quoted above is to find that in human experience which is not only black and white in the sense of being absolutely clear and unequivocal, but also black *or* white in terms of choice. He is looking for that which is *constant*. Part of the "tonic of wildness," as Henry David Thoreau calls it—a tonic not always readily available to the millions of urban dwellers in America—is that it puts us in the company of creatures that do not face the "conundrum of life," as Baldwin calls it. The Black-and-white Warbler, to take an apt example of such a creature, does not waver from what it is and try to choose between the colors with which it is streaked. It instinctively and single-mindedly clammers up the woody parts of a tree, like a Brown Creeper, searching for its insect prey, clammers down the woody parts of a tree, like a nuthatch, searching for its insect prey, and clammers all around the woody parts of a tree as itself, looking for its insect prey—an active, pugnacious, striking, stirring little bird that is the only member of its genus and that is what it is, without question and without compromise: a Black-and-white Warbler. But we, each of whom has an identity that is not only given, but also made, can only look upon such a creature with something like envy. If only pure being were so easy for *us*.

In an interesting and revealing interview exchange in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* entitled "On the Romantic Attitude Toward 'Simple' People and the Riddle of Personality," Warren opens by saying, "I have heard young Northern Negroes who have gone South to work on voter registration say that the salvation is in meeting the purity of feeling, the purity of expression, in some poor half-literate field hand who has just come awake to his manhood," to which Baldwin replies, "I would tend to agree with that" (285). This is the human version of "the tonic of wildness": when one encounters in life a person who, as Warren puts it, is "more of one piece, in self and in fate, than I could be. Than I could be, anyway, unless I worked very hard and had very good luck" (287). He remembers, as an example of such a person, the Reverend Joe Carter—the first figure presented in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*—who stoically endures arrest and humiliation when he attempts to register to vote in West Feliciana Parish in Louisiana.

But as Baldwin points out, such people are "far from simple," though



“ . . . the emotional, psychological make-up [that] allows them to endure is something of a mystery to me,” Baldwin confesses (286), as it seems also to be a mystery to Warren. Such people seem to have solved what Baldwin calls “the riddle of the human personality” (286), and both he and Warren yearn to know their answer, their secret. They seem to have forgiveness for, or to have always been innocent of, what Warren calls “the crime of being our unfulfilled and inchoate and fragmented selves” (282). They are able, freely and fully, to be “sensual,” as Baldwin defines that word in *The Fire Next Time* (another definition that he garbles and that Warren misrepresents and misinterprets): “to respect and rejoice in the force of life, or life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread” (57).

Like nature, the presence of such people can prompt us to search, as Baldwin does, for those facts, those realities, those constants, those “verities and truths,” as Faulkner called them, that are the laws of our being, and perhaps that bedrock can serve as a common foundation for the individual identity each of us makes for ourselves as well as the communal identity we make as a country and as a world. Perhaps these can be some of the things we try to teach the young and try to remember ourselves as we grow old, so that we individually, and as a species, do not have to learn them again and again and again, but they can become second nature to us, like instinct. Here is one of those facts, as stated by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*. “It is so simple a fact,” observes Baldwin, “and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: *Whoever debases others is debasing himself*” (97). Robert Penn Warren grasps this fact, which is why he says, in *Segregation*, “I don’t think you can live with yourself when you are humiliating the man next to you” (63).

The young man who murdered those nine innocent people in South Carolina last week did *not* grasp this fact, if it had ever even been presented to him as a fact he needed to grasp. On the contrary, he believed its opposite: that the only way to remain undebased and pure in his identity and being was to debase others. There are many bases upon which to debase others. The fact that he chose skin color, or race, means that he did not grasp two other facts that Baldwin presents in *The Fire Next Time*, and that are corollaries of the first: “. . . the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion. . . . The glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another—or others—always has been and always will be a recipe for murder” (118, 96). Until individuals of our species are born with a

knowledge of these facts that is in the blood and bones, like instinct, we must teach these facts, universally, repeatedly, and quickly.

# *Bad Feminist*

## A Review

BY KELLI NEWBY AND JILL GILBRETH

*5B. If you and your friend(s) are in the same field and you can collaborate or help each other, do this without shame. It's not your fault your friends are awesome. Men invented nepotism and practically live by it. It's okay for women to do it too.*

—From “How to be Friends with Another Woman,” by Roxane Gay

**Kelli:** Last summer, Jill and I met up to talk books and discovered we were both reading, enjoying, and hungering to discuss *Bad Feminist*, an essay collection by Roxane Gay. What struck me most about Gay’s work is her ability to mix academic and pop culture sources while dealing with racism, sexism, and intersectionality in utterly readable prose without shirking complexity or taking a side for the sake of taking a side.

**Jill:** I admired the way she works outside the dominant feminist discourse (and the jargon that goes with it) in favor of a pluralistic approach, one that values “the different feminisms within us”(xiii). Gay covers a lot of ground in the collection, requiring the reader to consider seriously the culture we consume.

**Kelli:** Gay moves in thought spirals, circling an idea, each pass taking us deeper into a conundrum. She is not trying to persuade us. She’s trying to make us comfortable with discomfort, telling us the truth without being “totally rude” (49). Most of the essays take us into vulnerable, complicated places and grant us clarity without reductionism. In short: places of truth. She holds herself to a high standard, and she asks her readers to put in the same amount of work.

**Jill:** In order to do that work, Gay suggests that we have to first meet each other (and ourselves) where we are. She's aware of the failures and flaws of feminism, but rather than "disavowing" feminism she asks us to disavow its failures (xii). In the same way we, as people, learn to disavow our failures rather than our humanity. For Gay this involves acknowledging the "mess of contradictions" in all of us. It means being honest with ourselves so that we can work together to find common ground. If that's not possible from where you're standing, then "(try to) become the feminist role model you would like to see moving through the world" (xiv).

**Kelli:** There are several times in the collection where Gay finds herself unable to offer constructive criticism. When this happens, she acknowledges her failing and examines it, rather than hiding behind an aura of objectivity. In her essay on *The Help*, Gay thoughtfully and mercilessly points out the rehashed stereotypes the book and movie propagate. But at the end, she reflects on how reading and watching *The Help* made her "painfully aware" of her own biases (216). She then puts herself under examination, admitting she'd hate to be told she can't write from the point of view of characters outside her experience, but "When it comes to white writers working through racial difference, though, I am conflicted and far less tolerant than I should be. If I take nothing else from the book and movie in question, it's that I know I have work to do" (217).

In refusing to give herself a break, in acknowledging her limitations as a critic, Gay both shows and tells us that she is a human being, throwing the focuses on how difficult and important is it for us to see the differences that arise from race, gender, and sexuality. But that at the same time, she tries to find the places where we realize we are all the same. Gay leads by example, interrogating the messages coming at her with a sharp mind and a nuanced cultural awareness, but she still allows herself to get transported into the stories that move her, which helps us realize of the humanity behind those stories.

**Jill:** In "Not Here to Make Friends," Gay addresses the fundamental need for belonging and the desire to be liked. Even if it means pretending. She exposes "likability" as a very elaborate lie, a performance, a code of conduct dictating the proper way to be" (85). Gay has struggled with this code, as a reader and a writer, she explains, because she's drawn to characters that "behave in socially unacceptable ways, say whatever is on their mind, and do what they want with varying levels of regard for the consequences" (86). In other words, characters who are human.

Essentially, she wants to create and read about characters who are complex, fully realized, and interesting, and she wants the reader to have the experience of being intrigued enough to sympathize with their way of navigating the world. She wants to make and read stories that are worth reading because they take us out of our comfort zone.

This cult of likeability is, for Gay, particularly disturbing in literary criticism. What place does a character's likability have to do with a story's merit, she wonders? Probably way more than it should. It's "odd," she argues, "that the question of likeability even exists in literary conversations" because it "implies that we are engaging in courtship" (86). And while there's nothing wrong with finding "kinship" in fiction, "literary merit shouldn't be dictated by whether we want to be friends or lovers with those about whom we read" (86).

Even more disturbing for Gay is the fact that the standards are different for male characters, as evidenced by the category of the anti-hero, "a special term to explain those ways in which he deviates from the norm, the traditionally likable," and who is considered "compelling" (88). Female characters who deviate from likeability raise questions: "[W]hy are these women daring to flaunt convention? [W]hy aren't they making themselves likable (and therefore acceptable) to polite society?" (88).

**Kelli:** In "What We Hunger For," Gay examines a heroine who has, to some degree, escaped the tyranny of likability: Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the wildly popular *Hunger Games* series. Katniss is "a heroine with issues ... She isn't blandly insecure the way girls are often forced to be in fiction," she's strong but "not sure she is up to the task of leading a revolution" (146).

As Gay careens between measured cultural analysis and fandom, she over and over proves her points from "Not Here to Make Friends" by holding Katniss up as an example of the power of a compelling, flawed heroine. Katniss pretend to be someone she's not only under great duress, and even then, she's not very good at it. She's brusque and no one would accuse her of being nurturing. And her readers care far more about her love triangle than she does.

Through her analysis, Gay makes it clear that a writer's duty to create compelling, rather than likeable, characters goes beyond hooking readers. It becomes a larger social responsibility to address darkness and trauma in fiction because both exist in real life. "I appreciated what the book got right about strength and endurance and suffering and survival" (138-9). Katniss's

struggle reminds Gay (and other readers who have endured trauma) that “suffering has few limits, and suffering has consequences that, all too often, we forget when narratives neatly imply that everything turns out okay.” Katniss does not belong to the world of likeable girls who endure hardships but have things turn out okay. Katniss demonstrates what “it takes to get better...it takes everything” (146).

**Jill:** But not all female characters get the same pass as Katniss. Gay recalls a current example of this double standard in an interview in *Publisher's Weekly* about Claire Messud's “rather ‘unlikable’ protagonist,” Nora, in her novel *The Woman Upstairs*. Without hesitation, the interviewer confesses that she “wouldn't want to be friends” with Nora, a woman whose “outlook is almost unbearably grim,” and who then asks, “would you?” Messud's response: “For heaven's sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert,” or with Oedipus, or Oscar Wao, or “any of the characters in *The Corrections*?” A reader who goes looking for friends in fiction is in “deep trouble,” she goes on to say, “the relevant question isn't ‘Is this a potential friend for me?’ but ‘Is this character alive?’” (88-9).

She exposes the sexism at play here, but brings the reader back to that question of humanity. Why are “professional and amateur critics alike” more comfortable with male characters who are “alive” than they are with women who “don't or can't pretend to be someone they are not” (95)? Why are characters like Nora and Katniss so unnerving? Because they ask us to consider the ways in which we may be or could be like them. And this intimacy “makes us uncomfortable because we don't dare to be so alive.”

For Gay, critics who negate unlikeable characters are really only “expressing a wider cultural malaise with all things unpleasant, all things that dare to breach the norm of social acceptability,” but she wonders why a person's likeability, “in fact or fiction,” is so central to our assessment of character (85). Is the question the inevitable result of a persistent desire for approval of our “culture of relentless affirmation” (86) on sites such as Facebook? Probably not, she decides, referencing Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which places the human need for love and belonging just above basic physiological and safety needs.

**Kelli:** Katniss's daring to be so alive, despite the tremendous trauma she endures, is what makes her so important to Gay not just as a character, but as a cultural touchstone. As Gay does in many other moments in the book, she

makes the personal political by including herself in the critique.

Interwoven with the examination of Katniss's strengths and flaws is the heart-wrenching story of Gay's first romantic relationship. She admits "I have always been lonely...I can be socially awkward, because I'm weird, because I live in my head" (141). She hungered for acceptance and love, and wanted to be "liked" so badly that it left her vulnerable to a boy who wouldn't acknowledge her at school, but who would "tell me what he wanted to do to me. He wasn't asking permission" (141-2). Gay writes, "I wanted to say 'no,' but could not because I would lose him. I would be nothing again" (142). The relationship ended with a brutal sexual assault by the boy and several of his friends. "They kept me there for hours. It was as bad as you might expect. The repercussions linger" (143). And the "wider cultural malaise with all things unpleasant, all things that dare to breach the norm of social acceptability" kept her from saying anything about what had happened to her.

As she weaves the disparate threads of her own story and commentary on *The Hunger Games* together, we gain the context to understand why Katniss's story "means too much" to her (140). Gay loves the franchise because it is a dark fairy tale full of suffering, with a heroine who is strong for everyone around her, but at great cost. Gay's gushing fangirl love for Peeta (a point in Katniss's love triangle) at the opening of the essay transforms into the hope of "a life she can share with a man who understands her strength and doesn't expect her to compromise that strength, a man who can hold her weak places and love her through the darkest of her memories, the worst of her damage." To deny, squelch, dismiss unlikeable heroines to to deny, squelch, and dismiss the importance and power of storytelling.

**Jill:** Gay is doing her part to be that person she would like to have as a role model, to "lead, in a small, imperfect way," encouraging us to offer insights and speak up, as she does in "raising [her] voice as a bad feminist," but she understands the importance of giving others a break (xiv). It's a subtle undercurrent in the collection, the suggestion that in order to have compassion for each other, we have to have compassion for ourselves. We have to stop pretending, own up to the fact that we are capable of making mistakes, and try to understand what's at stake for those who survive themselves and get better. But the goal is compassion for others, no exceptions.

**Kelli:** Going along with this, one of her dictates in "How to Be Friends With Another Woman" states one must criticize constructively without tearing



down cruelly (48-9). But instead of simply making a prescriptive list, she demonstrates how to do this over and over as she takes on problematic pop culture phenomena. For example, her now famous critique of Lena Dunham's show, *Girls*, pointedly notes that the lack of race on the show is troubling, but Gay spends just as much time insisting that it's unfair to ask a show to be everything: "It is unreasonable to expect Dunham to somehow solve the race and representation problem on television" (58).

Gay also takes on Tyler Perry in the same way. Much like in "How We Hunger," Gay circles a fraught topic, moving through the facts of something (Perry's history, his success) and her personal relationship with it until she arrives at something more universal. Just as she's about to write Perry off for his sexism and mediocrity, she relates the story of attending one of his films with an all black crowd. The moment gives us a broader context adding even more complexity to the situation. Is it simply that Perry is an "oasis in a cultural desert of black entertainment" (240)? Is Perry popular because his audience enjoys his moralizing and their "sneering at women" (241)? And what is his responsibility to "create good art for black people" (242)? Gay leaves us on an ambivalent note: "It is bittersweet that something is better than nothing, even if the something we have is hardly anything at all" (242).

**Jill:** Gay gives us so much to consider in this collection. But the thought I kept coming back to was that "feminism will better succeed with collective effort" (xiii). It inspired me to think more fully about the work ahead of me. Writing about these essays with a colleague I have always liked and respected feels like a good place to begin.

**Kelli:** Indeed. Having someone to discuss the essays with opened them up further and gave a starting point to develop a friendship further. I'm going to leave the last words to Gay, who concludes her list of "How to Be Friends with Women" with the following advice:

*13. My mother's favorite saying is "qui se ressemble s'assemble." Whenever she didn't approve of who I was spending time with, she'd say this ominously. It means, essentially, you are whom you surround yourself with.*

# The Jazz Trade

BY ZACK FINCH

Even then, under Jim Crow,  
the word boy (“hey boy”)  
could be exchanged for buoyancy,  
or some other floating currency,

by adjusting just a syllable  
to say it differently,  
with false fingering, ofay,  
to return the slur, yes sir,  
with some more fabulous technique.

What a funny form of freedom  
jazz is, Bird thought,  
before shoving off to sleep  
on a little cot  
in a Jackson Mississippi jail cell (1941),

cheek to cheek  
with that weak logic  
that dubs a spade a spade,  
a law a law a law a law  
impossible to change,  
impenetrable to riff,  
immune to moonlight’s evolution.

You can’t boycott life, I guess,  
but boy can you  
talk back to it.

# Tremble

BY STAN SPENCER

Above the red velvet skirt  
of the choir loft,  
Ma Amos turned her eyes  
to the vaulted ceiling  
of the sanctuary  
and sang the slave hymn  
of her forebears:  
“Were you dere when da sun  
refused to shine?  
O, sometime it causes me  
to tremble, tremble, tremble.”  
Angels took hold the notes  
and kissed each listener’s ear  
while husband Jim  
stoked the coals that  
licked at him  
like a mythical beast  
from the church furnace below.

Sometimes I think about  
the Edmund Pettus bridge  
And sometimes I think about  
who Edmund Pettus was  
and sometimes . . . sometimes  
it causes me to tremble . . . tremble.  
Good that it does.

With a religious fervor  
giving spur to the vigilante,  
Edmund Pettus chopped

through the Yukas tribes  
til they were no more.  
Good that I tremble.  
Defending slavery  
as a confederate general,  
Edmund Pettus rallied  
the confederacy  
well beyond Appomattox.  
Good that I tremble.  
In defeat, Edmund Pettus  
slipped into the hood  
of the Grand Dragon  
for the Ku Klux Klan.  
Good that I tremble.

Over 100 years later, James  
Chaney, Michael Schwerner,  
and Andrew Goodman  
were murdered;  
murdered because they  
dared to shine light  
on a part of Mississippi  
where the sun  
refused to shine.  
Prosecutors said  
the Klan and the law used its badge  
the Klan and the law used its jail  
the Klan and the law used its gun  
to hunt, to hold, and to kill.  
A mere handful of conspirators  
served less than six years in prison.

A Klan judge proclaimed,  
“They killed one nigger, one Jew,  
and a white man.  
I figure I give ‘em what  
I thought they deserved.”

Were you there when  
the sun refused to shine?  
Sometimes . . . sometimes  
does it cause you  
to tremble . . . tremble?  
Good that we tremble.

## Prose Poems

BY EWA CHRUSCIEL

Irena Sendler gets permission to work in the Warsaw Ghetto as a plumber. She smuggles babies in her toolbox and carries larger children in her sack out of the Warsaw ghetto. Her dog knows when to bark to muffle the sounds of the crying children when Nazi soldiers are near. She carries the shrunk pebbles in wheelbarrows. Two thousand six hundred and thirty five children ripple out of the Ghetto. She is small and plump like a donut. Through the gutters, through the tunnels, through the fissures blind moles dig their signs. Esther, Ezer, Aaron, Abigail, Becca, Imla will need to change their names and wrench their parents out of their palms. She buries their names in the jar. The names wriggle. The homunculi. The microscopic sea-horses. Sendler eventually gets caught & tortured. I use here an ampersand to remember her wrenched body. In a sealed mouth. In an hour-glass. She is a holy icon. Sendler gets nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize along with Al Gore, a smuggler of trees.

Jan Karski, a Polish Catholic, dresses as a Jew to smuggle evidence from the ghetto. He takes with him his photographic memory. Light bleeds and x-rays. He carries swooning eyes. He carries the dybbuks in the pores of his skin. In his pockets. The clouds of children. The porous streets, the ditches and sewers carry them. Pebbles of children in his mouth. These stones were feathers first. Red hair, feet of swallows. Swollen crosses. Red flicks. What trickles out of a smuggler's mouth? These children shrink into ripples. They trickle out of sewers into the other side, into their Christian names. They tap the earth. They are eggshells. He carries them to the land where honey and milk flow down the streets. He carries these dybbuks to the White House. In his palm their squawks and whimpers. He places his palm in Roosevelt's palm. His ruffled feet meet Roosevelt's feet leaning on a table. The swallows trickle out of Karski's mouth. The smoke of Roosevelt's cigarettes swallows the charcoal lines. Roosevelt in his swallow-tailed coat waits. His feet rock away the crucifixions. The smuggled Jews are noted down on the invisible 16<sup>th</sup> page of the New York Times. Invisible wrinkles on the page. A tree gets planted in his name in Jerusalem. Both Karski and the tree take the vow of silence.

*Cancer Ward* by Solzhenitsyn was banned. Huxley's *Brave New World* was banned. All Czesław Miłosz's books were banned. At a certain point, Lucy Montgomery was banned. Citizens' thoughts were banned. *Horror Vacui*. The establishment banned books which slandered the Soviet Union. As a result, 2,482 books were banned. All the books written on emigration were banned. Books that showed the West as an attractive place. From 1944 to 1945 four and half million letters were censored. People learned to use a code. If a wife wanted to say her husband was imprisoned for political reasons, she would use certain numbers or write: "he was lately absent." In high school we smuggled quotes from Orwell's "Animal Farm." *All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others*. The noblest contraband dwells in *fraintendimento*, understanding in-between.



Brass buttons, letters, whispers, prayers, metonymies. In Katyń forest in 1940, more than 14,000 Polish prisoners-of-war were murdered by the NKVD, the Soviet Secret Police. All in all, the Katyń genocide harvested 21,000 deaths of Polish officers, intelligentsia, clerics and officials. They were shot in the back of the head and thrown into mass graves. For 50 years, the Soviets covered this up, blaming it on the Nazis. There was no mention of Katyń in newspapers, books, textbooks. People who spoke the truth were incarcerated. Only brass buttons and saints witnessed.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Anne M. Blaschke** is a visiting assistant professor of history at the College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, MA, where she teaches and researches issues of gender, war, capitalism, U.S. politics, and “America in the World.”

**Ewa Chrusciel** has two books in English, *Contraband of Hoopoe* (Omnidawn Press, 2014) and *Strata* (Emergency Press, 2011), and two books in Polish: *Furkot* and *Sopilki*. Her poems were featured in *Laurel Review*, *eleven eleven*, *Jubilat*, *Boston Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Lana Turner*, *Spoon River Review*, and *Aufgabe*, among others. She translated Jack London, Joseph Conrad, I.B. Singer, as well as Jorie Graham, Lyn Hejinian, Cole Swensen, and other American poets into Polish. She is an associate professor at Colby-Sawyer College in New London, NH. For more information, go to her website: [www.echrusciel.net](http://www.echrusciel.net).

**Zack Finch** is a poet and scholar whose work has appeared in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Boston Review*, *Columbia Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, *Fence*, *Gulf Coast*, *Jacket2*, *Poetry*, *Tin House*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, and elsewhere. He also is the author of two collaborative works of poetry and visual art: *Chiasmus*, with painter Enrico Riley, and *Ten Ounces*, with artist Melanie Mowinski. He is an assistant professor in MCLA's English/Communications Department.

**Jill Gilbreth** teaches creative writing and literature at MCLA. Her fiction has been published in *Ploughshares* and *The Mind's Eye*. She is working on a novel.

**Frances Jones-Sneed** is professor of history and former director of Women's Studies at MCLA. She directed three National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grants and co-edited a book on *African Americans in the Upper Housatonic Valley*. She presently is editing the autobiography of a 19th century black minister, writing a monograph on Black New England Lives, and working on a curriculum project on W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. Jones-Sneed is co-director of the Upper Housatonic Valley African American Heritage Trail, and is on the board of the Samuel Harrison Society.

**Buffy D. Lord** holds a B.A. in history from Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts ('98) and a J.D. from Pepperdine University ('03) in Malibu, CA. She is a practicing attorney licensed in Massachusetts, Vermont, and Louisiana. She is a senior associate at the law firm Donovan & O'Connor, LLP, where she has practiced since 2005, and specializes in civil litigation.

**Mark D. Miller** is professor of English and chairperson of the English/Communications Department at MCLA. He is a Robert Penn Warren scholar and editor of the online journal, *Robert Penn Warren Studies*. "Black-and-white Warbler" is from a mixed-genre, autobiographical work-in-progress, entitled *Life Birds*, which consists of poems, essays, original artwork, and other visuals. Each poem or essay in *Life Birds* bears, as does its title, the species name of a bird on Miller's own life-list, the list that a birder keeps of all the birds seen during his or her lifetime.

**Kelli Newby** teaches in the English/Communications Department at MCLA. Her short fiction has been published in *The Mind's Eye* and she's currently seeking representation for her debut novel, *Griffin/Ángel*.

**Stan Spencer** qualifies annually in the WordXWord Festival finals. He performs in such venues as The Low Beat and McGreary's pubs; the Lichtenstein and MCLA Gallery 51 art centers; the Parlor and Dotties cafés; the Berkshire Museum and The Mount; Y Bar, where it all began; and, of course, a barber shop.

## Writer's Guidelines

*Submissions should adhere to the following:*

1. Submit unpublished manuscripts via email in MS-Word format. List your name, address, phone number and e-mail address, if available, on the cover sheet, with your name at the top of each page.
2. We will consider simultaneous submissions under the provision that the author notify us of this and contact us immediately if the material is accepted elsewhere.
3. Use MLA style, with in-text references, as appropriate to the content and disciplinary approach of your article (see MLA Style Manual for guidelines).
4. Please include a word count.
5. While we will consider articles of unspecified length, preference is given to articles fewer than 20 pages long.
6. We reserve the right to edit for clarity and accuracy.
7. We will consider artwork (e.g., photographs, line drawings, woodcuts).
8. Payment will be made in contributor's copies.

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Frances Jones-Sneed, Managing Editor  
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts  
375 Church St., North Adams, MA 01247  
For queries: [f.jones-sneed@mcla.edu](mailto:f.jones-sneed@mcla.edu)